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‘Khedkar can’t write UPSC exam as able & disabled’

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Markets bounce back as Sensex jumps 901 points

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈ روزنامہ بنگلور

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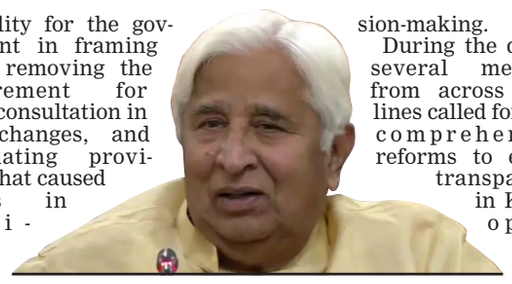
Karnataka Assembly passes bill to reform KPSC

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Assembly passed the Karnataka Public Service Commission (KPSC) (Conduct of Business and Additional Functions) (Amendment) Bill, 2025, on Tuesday, introducing reforms aimed at improving transparency and governance in the commission. The bill amends the KPSC Act of 1959, mandating a 50 per cent quorum for meetings, including the chairman, and authorising a single member to interview candidates for appointments.

Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil, who piloted the bill, described it as a “minor amendment” aimed at giving “immediate treatment” to the KPSC. He noted the bill would provide more flexibility for the government in framing rules, removing the requirement for KPSC consultation in rule changes, and eliminating provisions that caused delays in decision-making.



During the debate, several members from across party lines called for more comprehensive reforms to ensure transparency in KPSC’s operations. BJP MLA Suresh Kumar criticised the commission for its lack of transparency and accountability, suggesting the formation of a House committee to study other states’ public service commissions for improvements. Leader of the Opposition, R Ashok, emphasised the need for a more substantial overhaul, recommending Union Public Service Commission-like reforms for KPSC. The Assembly also passed the Karnataka Tax on Profession, Trades, Callings, and Employments (Amendment) Bill, 2025, increasing the annual tax for salary earners from Rs 2,400 to Rs 2,500, in line with proposals made in the 2025-26 state budget. *—PTI*

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M’rashtra blames ‘Chhaava’ for riots, Oppn accuses BJP

Curfew in Nagpur after tension over Aurangzeb’s grave

NAGPUR, 18 MARCH

More than 50 people have been taken into custody, Five FIRs registered and curfew imposed in parts of Nagpur, a day after protests against Aurangzeb’s tomb triggered violence in the city.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis claimed was premeditated.

Speaking in the Assembly on Tuesday, Fadnavis was quick to blame the Vicky Kaushal-starrer film ‘Chhaava’.

He said ‘Chhaava’, which is based on the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, reignited people’s emotions against the Mughal emperor and brought before them the true history of the Maratha king.

“Demands are being raised about Aurangzeb’s grave, a movement is going on. The grave has been there for 500 years, but after watching the ‘Chhaava’ movie, the way he murdered Sambhaji Maharaj, that has made people angry,” Union Minister Ramdas Athawale told reporters outside Parliament.

A file photo of CM Fadnavis with ‘Chhaava’ actor Vicky Kaushal during the film’s release; Miscreants went on a rampage in Nagpur, demanding the removal of the 17th-century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb’s tomb ***PHOTO: PTI***

However, the release of ‘Chhaava’ initially garnered strong support from the BJP and its leaders. The film was even made tax-free in BJP-ruled states, including Madhya Pradesh, Goa, and Chhattisgarh. Chief Minister Fadnavis himself attended a special screening of the movie.

Vishwa Hindu Parishad said it won’t tolerate any attempts to glorify Aurangzeb and claimed the Nagpur violence was planned.

As many as 34 cops were injured in the violence.

Meanwhile, Opposition blamed the BJP-led Maharashtra government for the Nagpur violence

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Sanjay Singh said the violence in Nagpur was part of a planned conspiracy.

Congress leader Karti Chidambaram said it was unfortunate that in 21st-century India, people are agitating over the history of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange claimed that violence was “sponsored” by the Mahayuti government and Fadnavis for the. *—Agencies*

SPEAK FOR 2 HOURS

Trump, Putin talk 30-day ceasefire

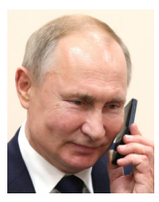
WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, held a 2-hour-long crucial call to discuss a proposed 30-day ceasefire, a potential pathway to end the ongoing war in Ukraine.

This call came after Ukrainian officials agreed last week to the ceasefire during talks in Saudi Arabia. Despite this, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains sceptical about Putin’s readiness for peace, as Russian forces continue their assault on Ukraine.

Ahead of the call, Trump said he expected to discuss land and power plants seized during the conflict, with White House deputy chief of staff Dan Scavino noting that the call was “going well.” Trump has made ending the war a key priority, even at the cost of straining relations with American allies who seek tougher measures against Putin.

Putin reportedly agreed in principle to the ceasefire proposal but insisted on guarantees that Ukraine would not use the pause to rearm. Trump also mentioned that discussions about dividing assets between Ukraine and Russia were underway. A key issue in the talks is the fate of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, seized by Russian forces, which has raised concerns of a potential nuclear disaster



Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump ***PHOTOS: PREZ OF RUSSIA/WIKI***

While Trump believes peace is within reach, experts like Bradley Bowman from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies question whether Putin is genuinely seeking peace or simply leveraging the situation for further concessions. Meanwhile, Zelenskyy continues to criticise Putin for prolonging the conflict, while the US strategy faces growing scrutiny for potentially undermining Ukraine’s negotiating position and weakening Western unity. *—PTI*

Truce shattered, Israeli strikes kill 413 in Gaza

GAZA STRIP, 18 MARCH

Israel launched airstrikes across the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, killing at least 413 Palestinians, including women and children, according to hospital officials. The White House said it had been consulted and voiced support for Israel’s actions. The surprise bombardment shattered a ceasefire in place since January and threatened to fully reignite the 17-month-old war. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the strikes after Hamas refused Israeli demands to change the ceasefire agreement. Officials said the operation was open-ended and was expected to expand. *—PTI*

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14 acres of land ‘encroached’ by HDK cleared

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The State Revenue Department on Tuesday initiated measures to clear the encroachment of 14.04 acres of land in Ramanagara district in Karnataka, allegedly by the family of Union Minister Kumaraswamy, official sources said. Kumaraswamy, who holds steel and heavy industries’ portfolio, called the government action an act of “vendetta politics” and said he would fight it out legally. “I purchased this property 40 years ago. I will fight this case within the framework of law. There is no need for worry,” he said.*—PTI*

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Telangana Assembly passes SC categorisation bill

HYDERABAD, 18 MARCH

The Telangana Assembly on Tuesday unanimously passed the Telangana Scheduled Castes (Rationalisation of Reservations) Bill, 2025 to implement the categorisation of SCs. Presenting the bill, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy said his government constituted a cabinet sub-committee after the Supreme Court ruled in favour of SC categorisation last year. *—PTI*

SC orders CBI to probe builder-bank nexus

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Supreme Court has directed the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to formulate a roadmap for investigating the alleged “builder-banks nexus” that has left thousands of homebuyers in the National Capital Region (NCR) in distress. The bench comprising Justices Surya Kant and N Kotiswar Singh took note of grievances regarding the subvention scheme, whereby banks paid 60 to 70 per cent of home loans directly to builders, who failed to complete projects on time.

Under the scheme, builders are required to pay equated monthly instalments (EMIs) until the flats are delivered to homebuyers. When builders defaulted on these payments, banks turned to homebuyers for repayment. The court expressed concerns about potential mafia involvement and emphasised the need for a thorough investigation.

CBI counsel Aishwarya Bhati was tasked with outlining the investigative strategy, and former Intelligence Bureau officer Rajiv Jain was appointed as amicus curiae for his expertise in economic offences. The CBI will initially focus on Greater Noida, identified as a hotspot for problematic housing projects. The bench noted ongoing issues in the real estate sector, expressing urgency to address the plight of affected buyers. It also highlighted a worrying lack of compliance with previous court orders by builders and banks, indicating possible collusion. *—PTI*

ED raids firms linked to Soros in B’luru

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) conducted searches at the premises of Open Society Foundations (OSF), an organisation backed by US billionaire George Soros and its investment arm and some linked entities in Bengaluru, on Tuesday. The searches were carried out as part of an investigation into alleged foreign exchange violations, official sources said.

Eight premises of some of the beneficiaries of Open Society Foundations (OSF) and Economic Development Fund (EDF), including those linked to some international human rights bodies, and a company named Aspada Investments Pvt. Ltd. were searched under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), sources in ED said.

According to sources, a preliminary investigation by the ED suggests that OSF was put under the “Prior Reference Category” by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2016, thereby restricting it from giving unregulated donations to NGOs in India. It is alleged that to bypass this restriction, “the OSF had subsidiaries in India and brought in funds in the form of FDI and consultancy fees, and these funds have been used to fund activities of the NGOs, which is a FEMA contravention. The ED is also probing the end use of FDI funds brought in by the Soros Economic Development Fund (EDF). However, OSF was not immediately available for comment on the Enforcement Directorate’s action. Soros, a Hungarian-American political activist, along with his organisations, including OSF, has previously faced accusations from the ruling BJP of acting against India’s interests. *—PTI*

ALL ABOUT GEORGE SOROS

Net Worth: $7.2B (According to Forbes)

- The Hungarian-American hedge fund tycoon managed client money in New York from 1969 to 2011.
- In February 2023, Soros criticised Prime Minsiter Narendra Modi for his alleged Islamophobia, cronyism and authoritarianism, saying: “Inciting violence against Muslims was an important factor in his meteoric rise.”
- BJP accused Soros of trying to undermine Indian democracy and linked him with Congress.
- This came after OCCRP, backed by Soros, released a report in 2023 alleging stock manipulation by Adani Group.

Kannada outfits announce statewide bandh on 22 March

BENGALURU 19 MARCH

Kannada Okkoota, a coalition of pro-Kannada groups, alongside the Transport Employees’ Union, has called for a statewide bandh on 22 March to protest the alleged oppression of Kannadigas in Belagavi.

This was after a recent incident where a State-run bus conductor was assaulted for not speaking Marathi.

The bandh will exempt essential services, including hospitals and milk supply. The KSRTC and BMTC employees’ unions have pledged their support, with Chandru, President of the Transport Employees’ Federation, confirming their participation. However, no official word has been given on Namma Metro’s involvement. *—Salar News*

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Sunita, Wilmore on way back to Earth after 9 months

CAPE CANAVERAL, 18 MARCH

NASA’s two stuck astronauts headed back to Earth with SpaceX on Tuesday to close out a dramatic marathon mission that began with a bungled Boeing test flight more than nine months ago. Butch Wilmore and Indian-origin Sunita Williams bid farewell to the International Space Station, their home since last spring departing aboard a SpaceX capsule alongside two other astronauts.

The capsule undocked shortly after 1 am Eastern and aimed for a splashdown off the Florida coast five hours later, if weather permits. The two were expected to be gone just a week or so after launching on Boeing’s new Starliner crew capsule on 5 June but technical issues cropped up pushing their homecoming to February. Even as Wilmore and Williams transitioned to full time crew members, their plight captured the world’s attention, giving new meaning to the phrase “stuck at work.” While other astronauts had logged longer spaceflights over the decades, none had to deal with so much uncertainty.

Residents of her ancestral village in Gujarat’s Mehsana are planning celebrations akin to Diwali on Wednesday morning, marking the end of her nine-month stint at ISS. *—PTI*

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FIRST IN COUNTRY

K’taka launches ‘Beyond Screens’ Digital Detox Initiative

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

In a groundbreaking effort to tackle digital dependency, IT Minister Priyank Kharge launched ‘Beyond Screens’, India’s first industry-led Digital Detox Initiative. This initiative, a collaboration between the government’s Department of Electronics, IT, Biotechnology, and Science & Technology, and the All India Gaming Federation (AIGF), aims to promote responsible technology use and combat growing digital addiction.

The initiative, powered by Kahamind Healthcare Private Limited, serves as a comprehensive resource hub for individuals struggling with digital overuse. It provides structured interventions focusing on education, support, and empowerment, with objectives spanning short, medium, and long-term goals. ‘Beyond Screens’ intends not only to offer immediate assistance but to integrate digital detox programmes into mainstream healthcare.

Key aims include raising awareness about excessive digital usage, supporting individuals in cultivating healthier digital habits, and developing research-driven strategies to tackle the challenge at both individual and community levels. Kharge said, “As a firm believer of balance in our digital lives, I always say, ‘sunlight before screen light’.” He emphasised that the initiative is a move towards responsible digital consumption. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Man kills wife after she learns of his second marriage

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

A 29-year-old woman named Anita was allegedly killed by her husband, Babu, after she discovered his secret second marriage in Attibele. The couple had been married for nine years, but Babu recently wed another woman, Sushmita, leading to frequent arguments. On the night of the incident, Sushmita visited their home, sparking another heated dispute between Babu and Anita. The argument escalated, and in a fit of rage, Babu struck Anita on the head with a wooden stick. Sushmita, who tried to intervene, also sustained injuries. Despite being rushed to the hospital, Anita succumbed to her injuries. Following the incident, police arrested Babu on murder charges after inspecting the crime scene.
—Salar News

2 arrested after youth stabbed in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

A late-night clash among youths in Chikkagollarahatti escalated into violence on 14 March, resulting in one individual sustaining multiple stab wounds. Police have apprehended two suspects linked to the incident. Victim Keerthi Kumar was reportedly stabbed by Sunil and Ganesh following a heated exchange. The conflict began when Keerthi's friends, Madhu and Mahesh, quarrelled outside a wine shop. In an effort to mediate, Keerthi sought the assistance of Bhimesh. The situation intensified when an intoxicated Sunil, offended by Keerthi's casual reference to him as 'Macha', returned with Ganesh and allegedly attacked Keerthi with a knife. Madanayakanahalli police have taken Sunil and Ganesh into custody, while Keerthi is receiving treatment in hospital and is reportedly out of danger. Investigations continue.
—Salar News

BMRCL eyes revenue from ads on coaches

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC) has set an example for the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) to follow – advertisements on its train coaches. According to sources, the BMRCL has already floated tenders to attract advertisers from commercial establishments. As part of a pilot project, the corporation plans to provide slots for advertisements on 10 trains operating on the Green Line and another 10 on the Purple Line. In the initial phase, the BMRCL is considering a 10-month contract. Depending on the revenue generated, the project may be expanded further. "The income from the advertisements will contribute to the operations and maintenance. The tender process has already begun, and some advertisers have shown interest. The bidding process will conclude in a month," said Yeshawant Chavan, the chief public relations officer of the BMRCL.
—Salar News

Kannada outfits announce statewide bandh on 22 March

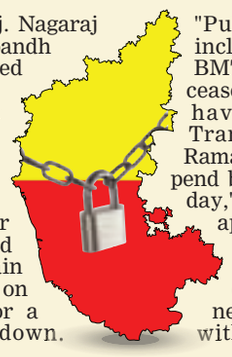
BENGALURU 19 MARCH

Kannada Okkoota, a coalition of pro-Kannada groups, alongside the Transport Employees' Union, has called for a statewide bandh on 22 March to protest the alleged oppression of Kannadigas in Belagavi.

This was after a recent incident where a State-run bus conductor was assaulted for not speaking Marathi.

The bandh will exempt essential services, including hospitals and milk supply. The KSRTC and BMTC employees' unions have pledged their support, with Chandru, President of the Transport Employees' Federation, confirming their participation. However, no official word has been given on Namma Metro's involvement.

The decision was made following a meeting held on Tuesday in Bengaluru, led by Kannada activist and former MLA Vatal Nagaraj. Nagaraj confirmed that the bandh would be observed from 6am to 6pm on 22 March. A protest march will also be held from Town Hall to Freedom Park at 10.30am.



Speaking to Salar News, Nagaraj urged the public to refrain from using vehicles on the day, calling for a complete shutdown. "Public transport, including KSRTC and BMTC buses, must cease operations. We have requested Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy to suspend bus services for the day," he said. He also appealed to metro commuters to avoid travel, emphasising the need for solidarity with the Kannada cause. "Even government vehicles, including those of the Chief Minister and ministers, should remain off the roads," he added.

Nagaraj also criticised the lack of Kannada representation in neighbouring states, comparing it to the presence of Shivaji statues in Karnataka. "In Maharashtra, there are no statues of Kannada leaders. Why should we tolerate this disparity?" he said.

Food delivery executives and workers' unions have urged hotels to shut down in support, threatening to withdraw support for hotels that do not comply. The Bruhat Bangalore Hotels Association is yet to decide on hotel participation.

Bruhat Bangalore Hotels Association President PC Rao stated that a meeting will be held with association members before reaching a conclusion.
—Salar News

14 acres of Ramanagara land 'encroached' by HDK cleared

HDK calls it act of 'vendetta politics', says will fight it legally

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The State Revenue Department on Tuesday initiated measures to clear the encroachment of 14.04 acres of land in Ramanagara district in Karnataka, allegedly by the family of Union Minister Kumaraswamy, official sources said.

Kumaraswamy, who holds steel and heavy industries' portfolio, called the government action an act of "vendetta politics" and said he would fight it out legally.

"I purchased this property 40 years ago. I will fight this case within the framework of law. There is no need for anyone to worry," he said.

Following the High Court's direction to reclaim government land from encroachment, the Revenue Department, in coordination with district authorities and the police department, deployed earthmovers at Kumaraswamy's farmhouse at Kethaganahalli at Bidadi in Ramanagara district, which is adjacent to Bengaluru, and started the drive.

Speaking to reporters, Deputy Commissioner of Ramanagara district, Yashwanth Gurukar said, "We are working here to reclaim the land based on the High Court direction about encroachment in some survey numbers here (Kethaganahalli)." In January this year, the state government constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the encroachment of government land in Kethaganahalli. The SIT found that 14.04 acres of land in survey numbers 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, and 79 had been encroached upon, based on a joint survey conducted by the Revenue Department and the Survey Settlement Department, sources said.
—PTI

HD Kumaraswamy **PHOTO: ANI**

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah speaks during the Assembly session in Bengaluru, Karnataka **PHOTO: PTI**

IS THIS BRAND BENGALURU?

Uncleared garbage scattered on a footpath near Guddadahalli on Mysore Road in Bengaluru on Tuesday. BBMP is facing disruptions in garbage collection, highlighting the city's ongoing struggle with waste management, a long-standing issue in Bengaluru **PHOTO: MOHAMEED ASAD**

RAINS LASH KARNATAKA AMID HEATWAVE ALERT

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

While a heat wave is being predicted for north and south interior Karnataka till March 20, rains lashed several parts of Karnataka on Tuesday, the Met department said.

In a statement Meteorological Centre, Bengaluru, isolated places in Dakshina Kannada, Kodagu, Chikkamagaluru and Chamarajanagar districts are experiencing light to moderate rain and thundershowers. Meanwhile, Kodli hobli in Kalaburagi and Kallur hobli in Raichur recorded the maximum temperature of 42.8 degree Celsius on Tuesday. Many places in Kalaburagi, Raichur Yadgir and Bidar and a few places in Vijayapura district recorded maximum temperature of 40 degree Celsius.
—PTI

Bill granting 4% quota for Muslims tabled in Assembly

- BJP has called the government's move to provide a 4 per cent reservation for Muslims in government contracts an "unconstitutional misadventure" and vowed to oppose it.

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The Karnataka government on Tuesday tabled a Bill in the Legislative Assembly to introduce a 4 per cent reservation for Muslims in public contracts. The Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements (Amendment) Bill, 2025 was tabled by Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil.

The Bill presented on Tuesday, aims to address unemployment among backward classes and promote their participation in government construction projects.

According to the statements and objects of reasons, the Bill also provides for reservations among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes in the procurement of goods and services, construction works, in notified departments, for contracts valued between Rs 1-2 crore. It encourages their participation in such procurement to the extent of 17.5 per cent for persons belonging to SC, 6.95 per cent for those belonging to ST, 4 per cent for Category 1 of OBC, 15 per cent for Category 2A, and 4 per cent for Category 2B (Muslims).

The BJP has called the Karnataka government's move to provide a 4 per cent reservation for Muslims in government contracts an "unconstitutional misadventure" and vowed to oppose it at all levels, including challenging it in court, until it is revoked.

Currently, Karnataka provides reservations in civil works contracts for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) at 24 per cent, Other Backward Classes (OBC)–Category 1 at 4 per cent, and OBC–Category 2A at 15 per cent.

The Bill seeks to fulfil a long-standing demand to include Muslims under Category 2B of the OBCs with a 4 per cent reservation.
—PTI

Belagavi widow stripped, assaulted over land dispute

BELAGAVI, 18 MARCH

A widow was assaulted, including being stripped naked, by 15 relatives in Harlapur village, Savadatti taluk, Belagavi on Monday. The incident stems from a long-standing land dispute with her sister-in-law.

This event follows a similar incident in December 2022, where a woman was assaulted, stripped, paraded, and tied to an electric pole in Hosa Vantamuri village, also in Belagavi taluk, drawing national attention.

Belagavi Superintendent of Police (SP) Bhimashankar Guled confirmed the assault, stating that several individuals, including a female relative, have been apprehended. However, the cop emphasised that discrepancies in the victim's account necessitate a thorough investigation.

The victim, arriving at the police station in torn clothing, filed a formal complaint. Female constables provided her with clothing and subsequently a new saree. Following initial medical treatment at a government hospital, she was transferred to a hospital in Dharwad for further care.

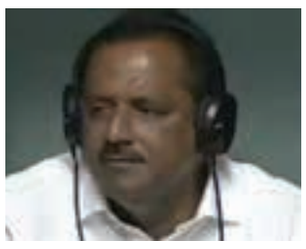
The victim allegedly is attempting to claim 4 acres and 15 guntas of land registered in her sister-in-law's name. The dispute resulted in two prior First Information Reports (FIRs), one in June 2023 and the other in December 2023, filed by the sister-in-law, who currently cultivates the land. The victim allegedly attempted to obstruct the harvest.
—Salar News

Speakers raps Ministers' absence in Assembly

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Assembly Speaker UT Khader on Tuesday criticised the absence of ministers in the House, saying that their absence from proceedings lowered the dignity of the government. He sought to know why the ministers chose to hold their positions unless they could attend Assembly sessions and take part in the discussions.

Responding to opposition BJP's criticism of the government, he said most of the Ministers were absent in the Assembly. Pointing out that no Minister other than Krishna Byre Gowda was present in the House on Monday evening, he said his presence facilitated some legislative business.



"They want to become ministers, but they can't answer or stand on behalf of the government in the Assembly. What should be done?" he said, adding that the Opposition's criticism on the issue was valid.

When Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil arrived in the House, Khader said, "When the Chief Minister is in the House, all ministers come. It is not required, as the Chief Minister can manage things. They should come when the CM is not there. What is the use of (ministers) coming when CM is here and leaving when he is not there?"
—PTI

Panel to probe officials' misconduct

Assembly Speaker UT Khader has referred allegations of misconduct by government officials towards Congress MLA Raju Kage and BJP MLA Basawaraj Mattimud to the privilege committee for further action. Addressing Kage's breach of privilege notice against Principal Secretary of the Revenue Department, Rajender Kumar Kataria, Khader emphasised the need to uphold the dignity of legislators. Kage claimed he was insulted while discussing issues related to his constituency, and Mattimud alleged mistreatment by Additional Superintendent of Police Mahesh Meghannavar.
—PTI

CONCERNS RAISED OVER SHORTAGE OF DOCTORS IN BIDAR

BIDAR, 18 MARCH

BJP MLA Prabhu B Chavan raised the issue of staff shortages in public hospitals, community health centres and primary health centres in Aurad (B) and Kamalnagar taluks in the Legislative Assembly.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Dinesh Gundurao, who tabled the reply to the question said, that approvals for the recruitment of 337 specialist doctors and 250 general duty medical officers on a contractual basis are in the final stages. Moreover, 320 paramedical positions are set to be filled via a special recruitment committee, with a selection list forthcoming. The minister also confirmed plans to recruit 1,205 Primary Health Security Officers and 300 Health Inspectors, with draft special recruitment rules being prepared.*—Salar News*

OFFICIALS CALL FOR SMOOTH KARAGA FESTIVAL IN BENGALURU

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The Special Commissioner of Administration, Avinash Menon Rajendran, convened a preliminary meeting on 18 March to discuss preparations for the renowned Karaga Mahotsava, scheduled for 4 to 14 April 2025. The meeting, held at Hall-01 of the Municipal Corporation Central Office, emphasised the importance of coordinating efforts for the world-famous Bangalore "Karaga Shaktyotsava."

Menon directed officials from various departments, including traffic, BBMP, and BESCOM, to ensure smooth and safe celebrations. He highlighted the necessity of completing ongoing white-topping work at the temple by the end of the month and stressed that electric lights would be installed, with existing ones being checked. Furthermore, roads and footpaths along the event route must be repaired.

BESCOM has been tasked with preventing power outages, while additional sanitation staff will be deployed to maintain cleanliness. *—Salar News*

'DRIVER HAD HEADPHONES ON'

Pregnant woman killed as JCB knocks down pole

BENGALURU 18 MARCH

Two women, including one who was pregnant, were killed and two children were injured after an electric pole collapsed on them during an ongoing road repair work in Bengaluru on Monday evening, police said.

The incident occurred when a reversing JCB earthmoving vehicle struck the pole, causing it to fall onto the victims.

The victims, 35-year-old Soni Kumari, who was four months pregnant, and her friend Sumathi, also 35, were walking home after picking up their children from a nearby tuition centre. Both women were residents of Suddaguntepalya. Soni, originally from Bihar, had lived in Bengaluru for eight years with her two children, while Sumathi, from Tamil Nadu, had settled in the city with her family. Both women were killed instantly at around 6:30 pm.

The accident took place on Suddaguntepalya Main Road, where roadworks were being carried out. As the JCB vehicle reversed, it collided with an electric pole, causing it to fall. Local residents have raised concerns about the driver's negligence, claiming that he was wearing headphones while operating the vehicle. They allege that he failed to notice an overhead electric wire, which caused the pole to uproot and collapse when pulled by the reversing vehicle.

A resident, Hanumanthappa, told Salar News, "When the driver was reversing, he didn't notice the wire above, and when it was pulled, the pole fell on the women." Another resident, Mahendra Kumar, added, "We started shouting, and only then did the driver remove his headphones and stop the machine."

Police arrived at the scene shortly after the incident, detaining the JCB driver, named Raju. *—Salar News*

PM likens Maha Kumbh to Dandi March

Fuming Opposition accuses PM of not saying anything about stampede victims; LS adjourned

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Lok Sabha was adjourned for the day on Tuesday amid noisy protests by Opposition members seeking to ask questions on the statement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the Maha Kumbh.

The proceedings were earlier adjourned till 1 pm, shortly after Modi made his statement and the Opposition members rose in their seats in protest, with Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi apparently urging Speaker Om Birla to allow the Opposition members to speak.

They also demanded the inclusion of the stampede deaths in the statement.

Members of the Congress, TMC and other Opposition parties then stormed the Well, raising slogans, while Samajwadi Party members staged a walkout in protest.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks in the Lok Sabha during the Budget session of Parliament, in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

Parliamentary sources said the opposition parties demanded a discussion on the Maha Kumbh so that their members could share their views on the subject. They had demanded a discussion on the Maha Kumbh at a meeting of the Business Advisory Committee of the House. As many as 30 pilgrims were killed and 60 injured in a stampede at the Maha Kumbh on January 29.

When the House reassembled, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw responded to a debate on demands for grants of his ministry.

When the House took up the debate on demands for grants for the Jal Shakti ministry, the opposition members continued protesting in the Well, forcing the chair to adjourn the proceedings for the day.

Discussion on demands for grants of the Jal Shakti ministry was postponed to Wednesday. —*PTI*

RaGa: Oppn leader not allowed to speak

As the Lok Sabha was briefly adjourned amid opposition protests after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement on the Mahakumbh, Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday said the LoO should be allowed to speak according to the democratic structure but is not given permission in "new India". Gandhi also said the PM should have paid homage to those who lost their lives in the 29 January stampede at Maha Kumbh. "He did not pay homage to those who lost their lives (in the stampede in the Mahakumbh)," Gandhi said.

Parl clears Manipur Budget for FY26

Parliament on Tuesday approved the supplementary demands for grants, which entails Rs 51,463 crore additional spending in the current fiscal and the Manipur Budget for 2025-26 with the Rajya Sabha returning four bills to the Lok Sabha. Parliament also approved the Rs 1,291 crore demands for excess grants for 2021-22 fiscal and the Rs 1,861 crore supplementary demands for grants for Manipur in 2024-25. Manipur Budget provides for a total receipts of Rs 35,368 crore, while total expenditure was estimated at Rs 35,104 crore.

'No govt data on Kumbh stampede'

Inquiry into the Maha Kumbh stampede was conducted by the Uttar Pradesh government and no data on casualties and injured victims is maintained with the central government, the Lok Sabha was informed on Tuesday. While replying to a question by Congress MPs KC Venugopal and Kirsan Namdeo, Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai said "public order" and "police" were state subjects, according to the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution and was a state subject and said, 30 died and 60 were injured.

Sonia bats for Rs 400 MGNREGA wage

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi on Tuesday accused the BJP-led Centre of systematically undermining the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and demanded the raising of the minimum wage to Rs 400 per day and the number of guaranteed workdays to 150 a year.

Raising the issue through a Zero Hour mention in the Rajya Sabha, Gandhi said, "This landmark legislation (MGNREGA) has been a crucial safety net for millions of rural poor. However, it is deeply concerning that the present BJP government has systematically undermined the scheme."

The budget allocation (for the scheme) remains stagnant at Rs 86,000 crore, a 10-year low as a percentage of GDP, she alleged.

When adjusted for inflation, the effective budget has declined by Rs 4,000 crore, she said, adding that estimates suggest nearly 20 per cent of the allocated funds will be used to clear pending dues from previous years.

"Additionally, the scheme faces multiple challenges, including the exclusionary Aadhaar-based payment and the National Mobile Monitoring System, persistent delays in wage payment and wage rates not adequate to compensate for inflation," she said, and sought adequate financial provisions to sustain and expand the scheme. —*PTI*

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar conducts proceedings as Congress MP Sonia Gandhi speaks **PHOTO: PTI**

EC open to discuss online booth-wise poll data

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Supreme Court on Tuesday noted the Election Commission of India's (ECI) submission that it was willing to deliberate over the demand for uploading polling booth-wise voter turnout data on its website and asked the petitioners to make representations before the poll panel in 10 days. A bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justices Sanjay Kumar and K V Viswanathan was hearing two PILs filed by TMC MP Mahua Moitra and NGO Association for Democratic Reforms in 2019, respectively. The PILs sought a direction to the poll panel to upload polling station-wise voter turnout data on its website within 48 hours of conclusion of polling in the Lok Sabha and assembly elections. The poll panel's advocate Maninder Singh said Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar wanted a talk on the grievance. —*PTI*

Guj House evicts AAP MLA over land survey t-shirt

GANDHINAGAR, 18 MARCH

A legislator from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was evicted from the Gujarat legislative assembly on Tuesday after he arrived wearing a t-shirt with a sticker against land survey and refused to remove it. Hemant Khava's t-shirt had the slogan "Cancel faulty land-mapping work". When Speaker Shankar Chaudhary pointed out that such protest is not allowed inside the House, Khava said he was only trying to draw the government's attention towards farmers' troubles due to the ongoing land re-survey process for finalising the agriculture land records. "I am not protesting. I am just trying to draw the government's attention," said Khava when Chaudhary asked him to either change the t-shirt or leave the House during Question Hour of the budget session. —*PTI*

Telangana passes SC categorisation bill

HYDERABAD, 18 MARCH

The Telangana Assembly on Tuesday unanimously passed the Telangana Scheduled Castes (Rationalisation of Reservations) Bill, 2025 to implement the categorisation of SCs. Presenting the bill, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy said his government constituted a cabinet sub-committee after the Supreme Court ruled in favour of SC categorization last year.

The government had also appointed a one-man judicial commission to make recommendations for the implementation of SC categorization and later accepted its report. The commission divided 59 SC castes in the state into three groups to ensure equitable distribution of the 15 per cent reservation available for the SCs. According to Reddy, group 1 comprising 15 socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged SC communities, are given one per cent reservation.

Revanth Reddy **PHOTO: PTI**

Group 2, including 18 moderately benefited SC communities, are provided nine per cent quota. Group 3 comprising 26 significantly benefited SC communities, are given five per cent reservation.

Referring to demand for increasing reservation of SCs to 18 per cent from 15 per cent, he said his government would enhance the quota on population basis after the 2026 census is conducted. —*PTI*

'FAVOURS FOR FAMILY'

SC seeks replies from Arunachal, Centre as PIL dubs CM 'corrupt'

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

In a significant order, the Supreme Court on Tuesday agreed to examine a PIL alleging Arunachal Chief Minister Pema Khandu awarded contracts to his family members and asked the state government for details of the beneficiaries and inform if due process was followed.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justices Sanjay Kumar and K V Viswanathan also sought responses from union ministries of home affairs, finance and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on the issue within five weeks.

The bench was hearing a PIL filed by NGOs Save Mon Region Federation and Voluntary Arunachal Senaa alleging all government contracts in the state were being awarded to the CM's close family members. The bench specifically asked the state government to provide details on whether any government contract was awarded to Chief Minister Pema Khandu, who is party to the PIL.

PHOTO: PTI

Pema's father Dorjee Khandu's second wife Rinchin Drema and his nephew Tsering Tashi have been made parties to the case. Dorjee served as the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh from 2007 until his death in a helicopter crash in April 2011. The bench asked the state government to also give details, if any, relating to the grant of government contracts to other family members of the present chief minister.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for the petitioner NGOs, said the state of affairs was shocking as the state was being run like a private limited company. The state government opposed the plea saying it was a politically motivated petition. —*PTI*

Pak should vacate illegally occupied territory: India

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Pakistan should vacate Indian territory under its "illegal" occupation instead of "spreading lies", New Delhi said on Tuesday hitting out at Islamabad for its reaction to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks on Jammu and Kashmir during a podcast.

External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said the world knows that the real issue in Jammu and Kashmir is Pakistan's "active promotion and sponsorship" of cross-border terrorism. Modi during the podcast with Lex Fridman said "every attempt to foster peace with Pakistan was met with hostility and betrayal" and that he hoped that "wisdom would prevail on the leadership in Islamabad to improve bilateral ties". —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Naidu to meet Bill Gates today

AMARAVATI, 18 MARCH

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, who was in New Delhi on Tuesday to attend the wedding reception of a family member of Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, will meet Microsoft founder Bill Gates on Wednesday. "On 19 March, he will meet Bill Gates, the founder of the Gates Foundation," an official release said. The Gates Foundation is a non-profit organisation involved in combating poverty, diseases and inequity worldwide. The meeting between Naidu and Gates will centre on the foundation's collaboration with Andhra Pradesh in education, health and agriculture. In addition, they are also expected to sign agreements related to these sectors during the discussion, it said. —*PTI*

SC judges to visit Manipur

IMPHAL, 18 MARCH

Supreme Court Justice BR Gavai, alongside five other judges, is set to visit relief camps in Manipur on 22 March, as announced by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA). This visit follows the ethnic violence that erupted in the state on 3 May, 2023, resulting in over 200 fatalities, numerous injuries, and the displacement of thousands.

They will visit the camps as part of duodecennial celebrations of Manipur High Court. NALSA highlighted that many individuals are still seeking refuge in these camps nearly two years after the violence, underscoring the dire need for legal and humanitarian support for affected communities.

Prohibitory order was clamped down after a Hmar tribal leader was assaulted on Sunday by a few people **PHOTO: PTI**

Meanwhile, after the imposition of curfew in Manipur's Churachandpur district in view of clashes between Hmar and Zomi people, bodies of the two communities have agreed to lift a shutdown there, officials said on Tuesday.

Hmar Inpui and Zomi Council, apex bodies of the respective tribes, decided to work together and restore peace, they said. The prohibitory order was clamped down after a Hmar tribal leader was assaulted on Sunday by a few people. —*PTI*

Rabri, Tej face ED in land-for-jobs case

PATNA, 18 MARCH

Former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi and her MLA son Tej Pratap Yadav on Tuesday appeared before the Enforcement Directorate, which has also summoned her husband and RJD president Lalu Prasad for questioning in the land-for-jobs money laundering case, sources said.

Devi, 66, reached the ED office on Bank Road here along with her eldest daughter and Patliputra MP Misa Bharti. Hundreds of RJD workers also reached the ED office. Last year, the ED filed a chargesheet before a Delhi court, naming Rabri Devi and her daughters Misa Bharti and Hema Yadav as accused. —*PTI*

NZ PM AT AKSHARDHAM

Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon pays a visit to the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple, in New Delhi on Tuesday **PHOTO: PTI**

No relief to Kapil Mishra in code breach case

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday refused to stay the trial court proceedings against city Law Minister Kapil Mishra for allegedly making objectionable statements and violating the model code of conduct in 2020. Justice Ravinder Dudeja also issued notice to Delhi Police on the BJP leader's plea challenging a sessions court order that had dismissed his petition against the summons issued to him by a magisterial court in the case. "There is no need to stay the trial court proceedings. There is no stoppage of proceedings. This court does not feel it (is) necessary to stay the proceedings. The trial court is at liberty to proceed further with the matter," the judge said. —*PTI*

GABBARD'S INDIA VISIT ENDS

'America 1st doesn't mean America alone'

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

US President Donald Trump's policy of "America First" should not be misunderstood as "America alone" as it is similar to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment to "India first", US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard said on Tuesday.

In an address at the Raisina Dialogue on Sunday, Gabbard who is on a two-and-a-half-day trip in the first high-level visit to India said the Trump administration is looking at boosting ties with New Delhi including in the domain of security to confront various challenges including in the Indo-Pacific.

Amidst uncertain climate lingering with US immigration policies and tariffs, her visit is seen as an effort to resolve differences and restore optimism in trade discussions with Washington.

Tulsi Gabbard **PHOTO: :X/@ AISINADIALOGUE**

Gabbard, known to be a practicing Hindu, began her address with "namaste and Jai Shri Krishna", and said these words reflect the "eternal divine spirit" that exists within each of our hearts, and it's a reminder that "we are all connected, irrespective of race, ethnicity and religion".

"President Trump's commitment to "America first" and putting the security and freedom of Americans at the forefront of his policies shouldn't be misunderstood as "America alone", Gabbard said pointing out the approach was similar to New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Modi himself. "This is the expectation of any leader's commitment to their people to serve them and to put their interests at the forefront of their decisions," she stressed.

Trump should not be mistaken to be a president who doesn't understand the importance of relationships with other countries as he believes in working towards shared interests," she said.

The top American official, who said there were shared security concerns and strategic interests however, did not mention India's concerns over activities of pro-Khalistan elements operating from American soil or Trump's announcement on imposing reciprocal tariffs from April 2 on its partners and other nations.

The top American official extensively focused on explaining Washington's policy towards the Indo-Pacific region. —*PTI*

Ukraine won't accept Russian invasion: Minister

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Ukraine desires a peaceful resolution to its conflict with Russia but it will not compromise on its territorial integrity, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said on Tuesday.

During an interactive session at the Raisina Dialogue here, Sybiha also said a clear position on the proposed ceasefire is likely to emerge after a phone conversation between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The two leaders are scheduled to talk on Tuesday evening.

It will be in global interest to achieve long-lasting and just peace, Sybiha said. Ukraine is not opposed to the peace initiative, as it has accepted the US proposal on a 30-day ceasefire with Russia, the foreign minister said.

Andrii Sybiha **PHOTO: X**

At the same time, Sybiha said Ukraine will not compromise on its territorial integrity and security. "We will never recognise any part of the territory occupied by Russia," he said. Russia did not achieve any strategic goals by attacking Ukraine, he added. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Search continues at Telangana's SLBC tunnel on day 25

NAGARKURNOOL, 18 MARCH

The search efforts for seven individuals trapped within the partially collapsed SLBC tunnel have reached a 25th day on Tuesday. Rescue teams, including the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), intensified operations employing vital equipment in areas identified as likely havens for survivors. Officials reported that search operations around the 'D1' and 'D2' points were supplemented by cadaver dogs on Monday. The collapse on 22 February, trapped eight including engineers and labourers. —*PTI*

Woman held with pistol at Vaishno Devi shrine

JAMMU, 18 MARCH

A woman pilgrim from Delhi was arrested at the Mata Vaishno Devi shrine after a loaded pistol and six rounds of ammunition were discovered in her possession. Officials identified the accused as Jyoti Gupta, who asserted she is a retired police constable. The arrest occurred during a routine checkpoint near the sanctum sanctorum on the night of March 14-15. Authorities revealed Gupta's firearm licence had expired several years prior. An FIR has been filed, and an investigation is underway. In a related incident, another pilgrim from Uttar Pradesh, Sanjay Singh, was apprehended on Monday after two cartridges were found in his bag near the shrine. The ongoing scrutiny underlines the need for tighter security measures at religious sites, particularly considering the sensitive context of safety in public spaces. —*PTI*

Man held for grenade attack on YouTuber's home

CHANDIGARH, 18 MARCH

A 21-year-old man, Hardik Kamboj, was arrested in Haryana for allegedly throwing a "grenade-like object" at the residence of Jalandhar-based YouTuber Rozer Sandhu. The incident on Sunday was reportedly linked to a claim from Pakistani gangster Shahzad Bhatti, who suggested it was a retaliation against perceived insults to Islam. Upon his arrest in Yamunanagar's Bihta village, Kamboj was brought to Jalandhar for weapon recovery, during which he opened fire at police, resulting in a bullet wound to his leg. Police responded and apprehended him. The "grenade-like object" failed to detonate, averting a potential disaster. Kamboj confessed to his involvement and stated he had been incentivised with Rs 25,000 for the act. Authorities are continuing to investigate the potential involvement of other individuals related to this incident and have successfully recovered a .32 bore pistol from him. —*PTI*

Crackdown on illegal madrasas on in U'khand

RUDRAPUR, 18 MARCH

The crackdown on illegal madrasas continued in Uttarakhand on Tuesday, with the authorities sealing 15 such religious schools in Sitarganj and Kashipur. Action is being taken against illegal madrasas in the presence of heavy police force, led by Sub-Divisional Magistrate (Khatima) Ravindra Bisht and Circle Officer Bhupendra Singh Dhoni, officials said. Twelve madrasas have been sealed in Kashipur and three in Sitarganj so far, Bisht said. Madrasas not registered with the Uttarakhand Madrasa Board are being sealed. They also do not have other necessary documents. 15 were sealed in Dehradun. —*PTI*

'Khedkar can't write UPSC exam as able & disabled'

SC extends interim order of granting protection from arrest

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Supreme Court has ruled that former IAS probationer Puja Khedkar, alleged to have cheated and improperly utilised OBC and disability quota advantages in the civil services examination, cannot take the test separately as both an "able candidate" and a "disabled candidate."

A bench led by Justices BV Nagarathna and Satish Chandra Sharma heard Khedkar's case, postponing discussions until 15 April, following her counsel's request for additional time to respond to an affidavit from the Delhi government.

Khedkar received interim protection from arrest until 15 April, a measure initially granted on January 15. Additional Solicitor General S.V. Raju, representing the Delhi government, has argued for Khedkar's custodial interrogation to uncover the identities of middlemen implicated in the alleged scam involving forged disability certificates for UPSC candidates.

Khedkar's counsel, Bina Madhavan, asserted her client's willingness to cooperate with the investigation. Madhavan contended that Khedkar had secured a legitimate disability certificate after evaluation by the AIIMS medical board, denying any fraudulent conduct.

Justice Sharma remarked on the issue of Khedkar claiming separate attempts for the examination as both categories of candidates, stating, "It cannot be the case that you can avail separate attempts."

Ex-IAS trainee officer Puja Khedkar is accused of disability certificates PHOTO: X

Raju maintained that Khedkar's disability certificate was spurious, claiming that additional incorrect details on her forms further complicated her case.

The bench is set to deliberate further on 15 April, after the high court previously noted serious grounds for investigation into Khedkar's applications and participation in the prestigious UPSC exams since 2012. —*PTI*

SC EXPRESSES CONCERN OVER BAIL REJECTIONS

NEW DELHI,18 MARCH

The Supreme Court has raised concerns regarding the increasing prevalence of bail pleas being rejected by trial courts for "not very serious cases," despite investigations being completed. Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan warned that a democratic nation should not resemble a police state, where law enforcement can arbitrarily detain individuals without substantial justification.

During a bail hearing, Justice Oka expressed astonishment at the Supreme Court being forced to adjudicate cases that should appropriately be resolved at the trial court level, leading to unnecessary burdens on the judicial system. This is not the first instance of the court addressing concerns about lower courts denying bail under questionable pretences. —*PTI*

LOUDSPEAKERS BANNED

Security men march in view of protests over administrations restrictions on century-old Neja mela, in Sambhal, Sunday PHOTO: PTI

Sambhal citizens call for sehri

SAMBHAL, 18 MARCH

It is 3 am and the only figure visible in Sambhal's dark-lit bylanes is a lonesome man, walking down lazily with a kaftan loosely draped around his neck and a green 'saafa' covering his head.

Ever since the beginning of Ramadan, Mohammad Suhail has been giving a wake-up call to the 'rozedaars' (people observing fast during Ramzan) to begin their 'sehri' (the meal before the fast).

With a drum hanging around his neck, Suhail shouts, "Uth jao bhaiyo, sehri kaa time ho chuka hai..."

Muslims have been forced to return to the rather primitive practice due to the Uttar Pradesh government's banning loudspeakers at religious places in 2022.

Suhail is not alone made to strain his vocal cords.

With the loudspeakers gone post a ban imposed by the government, muezzins too are now giving 'azaan' – a call for prayer – shouting from the mosques' rooftops.

Several loudspeakers, apparently taken off mosques, lay before policemen when PTI visited a local police station.

Cops warn action against rumours in Sambhal

A day after officials denied permission to the organisers for the annual 'Neja Mela', a police official on Tuesday said social media is being monitored and strict action will be taken against anyone spreading rumours.

Additional Superintendent of Police of Sambhal Shrish Chandra said said objections had been raised saying it was not right to make a flag in the memory of invader Mahmud Ghaznavi's nephew and military commander Syed Salar Masud Ghazi, who came to the country with the aim of looting.

The three-day Mela was scheduled to be held from 25 March.

Sambhal has been tense since riots broke out on 24 November, 2024, during protests against a court-ordered survey of the Mughal-era Shahi Jama Masjid. —*PTI*

Tamil signboards must in Puducherry

PUDUCHERRY, 18 MARCH

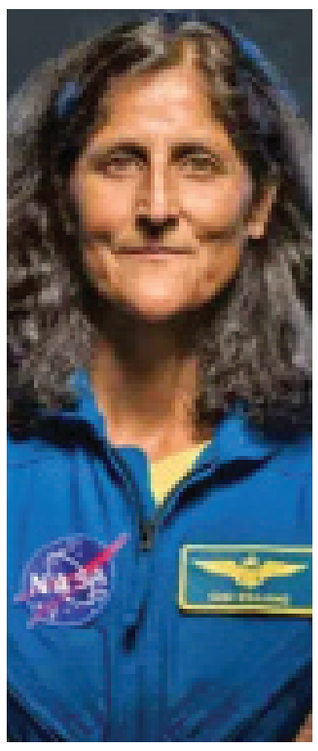
Chief Minister N Rangasamy announced on Tuesday that the government would issue a circular mandating all shops and establishments to display their names in Tamil. This decision follows a plea from Independent member G Nehru, also known as Kuppusamy, who raised the issue during Zero Hour in the Assembly. Rangasamy assured that strict instructions would be relayed to ensure compliance regarding Tamil signboards.

Nehru stressed the importance of upholding the Tamil language and called for the government to enforce these measures rigorously. The Chief Minister also revealed that all government department invitations would now include Tamil versions, emphasising the government's commitment to honouring the language.

In other Assembly discussions, Public Works Department and Fisheries Minister K Lakshminarayanan informed that the government plans to place boulders along the entire 24-km stretch of the Puducherry coastline to combat sea erosion. He indicated that around Rs 1,000 crore would be needed for this project, with financial assistance from the Centre anticipated to support its execution. —*PTI*

Puducherry Chief Minister N Rangaswamy speaks during the Budget session of Puducherry Assembly, Monday PHOTO: X

Looking forward to meeting you: PM to Sunita Williams



Sunita Williams PHOTO: X

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Union Minister Jitendra Singh announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed his support for Sunita Williams, the celebrated astronaut who has spent almost nine months aboard the International Space Station (ISS). In a letter sent to Williams via astronaut Mike Massimino on 1 March, PM Modi conveyed the collective pride of 1.4 billion Indians.

"The Prime Minister wished her strength and a safe return, emphasising India's deep bond with this illustrious daughter," Singh stated. In his letter, Modi noted he often inquired about her well-being during meetings with President Trump and President Biden.

"I am proud of your achievements," PM Modi wrote. "Even thousands of miles away, you remain close to our hearts, and we are praying for your health and success in your mission."

He also acknowledged her mother, Bonnie Pandya, and recalled meeting her late father during a visit to the US.

- "I am proud of your achievements," PM wrote. "Even thousands of miles away, you remain close to our hearts, and we are praying for your health and success in your mission."

NASA's Boeing Starliner astronauts Williams and Barry 'Butch' Wilmore, along with two others, undocked from the ISS and are due to splash down on Earth this evening. Their return follows a remarkable nine months in space, with Williams and Wilmore launching on 5 June, 2024. —*PTI*

HIGH-SECURITY IN J&K AMID TERROR THREAT

JAMMU, 18 MARCH

In light of recent terror attacks in Pakistan, including the assassination of a leading commander of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), authorities in Jammu and Kashmir have declared a high-security alert. Protected individuals, particularly politicians, have been instructed to adhere strictly to security protocols for their safety.

This comes after recent violence in Balochistan, notably the train hijacking and the killing of LeT commander Zia-ur-Rehman, who had previously been wanted for attacks in J&K.

Intelligence reports suggest the likelihood of a 'lone wolf' or targeted attack to retaliate against the commander's death, especially in conjunction with the anniversary of the historical 'Jang-e-Badr' military victory. —*PTI*

Scribe killed for report on project irregularities: 1,200 page chargesheet

BIJAPUR, 18 MARCH

Freelance journalist Mukesh Chandrakar was killed for reporting irregularities in road construction work in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district and the murder was planned by a contractor along with his two brothers and a supervisor, as per a charge sheet filed on Tuesday.

To mislead the police, the accused dumped the journalist's body into a septic tank and covered it with a fresh concrete slab.

The 1,200-page charge sheet was filed in a court in Bijapur district.

It named contractor Suresh Chandrakar, (his brothers) Ritesh Chandrakar and Dinesh Chandrakar, and Mahendra Ramteke, Bijapur Additional Superintendent of Police Mayank Gurjar said. Suresh Chandrakar was the main accused who planned the journalist's murder after he reported irregularities in the Nelasnar-Mirthur-Gangaloor road construction work executed by Suresh and his associates, police said.

Four accused were charged under sections 103 (murder), 238 (causing disappearance of evidence of offence, or giving false information to screen offender), 61 (criminal conspiracy), 239 (intentional omission to give information of offence by person bound to inform), and 249 (harbouring offender) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), said Gurjar, heading the Special Investigation Team (SIT).

Gurjar said the digital and physical evidence was examined and included in the case diary. Mukesh Chandrakar, 33, went missing on January 1 this year. Two days later, his body was found dumped in a septic tank on a property owned by Suresh. —*PTI*

MANMADE DISASTERS

Lahaul and Spiti most vulnerable to avalanches in Himalayas

DEHRADUN, 18 MARCH

'Lahaul and Spiti' is the most vulnerable to avalanches in Himachal Pradesh, while Chamoli the most vulnerable in Uttarakhand, according to an analysis of 11 districts in the two Himalayan states.

An increase in avalanches in the Indian Western Himalayas in recent years has been attributed to the combined effects of multiple factors, including climate change, complex terrain and increasing human activities.

Researchers Akshay Singhal, M Kavya and Sanjeev K Jha, from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Bhopal, proposed an analytical framework for developing a 'CAVI' score, or 'combined avalanche vulnerability index'.

Lahaul and Spiti, Kinnaur and Shimla in Himachal Pradesh saw fresh snowfall while light rainfall was recorded in other parts PHOTO: PTI

"The CAVI shows that all the highly vulnerable districts are located in Himachal Pradesh, while most of the districts of Uttarakhand are moderately vulnerable," the authors wrote in the study published in the journal Environment, Development and Sustainability.

"The district 'Lahaul and Spiti' is the most vulnerable district, while Shimla (Himachal Pradesh) and Pauri Garhwal (Uttarakhand) are the least vulnerable," they wrote. They added, "The most vulnerable district in Uttarakhand is Chamoli."

Earlier this month, an avalanche hit a Border Roads Organisation camp in the village of Mana, located in Chamoli, killing eight workers.

The team also assessed each of the 11 district's avalanche risk based on exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity.

Meteorological factors, such as rainfall, snow depth and temperature, contribute towards a district's 'exposure' to avalanches, while slope and population are among those affecting 'sensitivity', the authors explained.

Socio-economic factors, such as literacy, hospitals, forests, and houses with concrete walls, help determine the capacity of a district's population to adapt to an increased avalanche risk. —*PTI*

LAHAUL AND SPITI: Most exposed district

- **Shimla:** Most sensitive
- **Rudraprayag:** Least adaptive to avalanches.
- Estimated to cause about 30-40 deaths each year.
- What increases avalanche risk? Rapid construction of roads, dams, and tunnels, and regular movement of heavy vehicles.

MANGO-LICIOUS SEASON IS HERE

A vendor sells varieties of mangoes in Bengaluru's Lalbagh Yamahal Road with summer around the corner
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Trudeau gone, Canada and India get set to fix ties

A thaw between Canada and India might be on the horizon with Justin Trudeau stepping down and being replaced by Mark Carney as Canada's Prime Minister.

Trudeau had openly clashed with New Delhi since September 2023, when he linked the death of a Sikh separatist leader and Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar to Indian government agents. New Delhi angrily denied any winvolvement in the killing, which took place near Vancouver, and the ties between the two countries plunged to historic lows.

But Trudeau is now out of office, and his successor Carney is seen as having a technocratic and globally oriented perspective on foreign ties, including Ottawa's relationship with the world's most populous nation. Providing that Carney survives Canada's upcoming parliamentary election.

"There are opportunities to rebuild relationships with India, there needs to be a shared sense of values around commercial relationships and if I am the Prime Minister, I look forward to the opportunity to build that," said Carney, before being elected as the leader of the governing Liberal Party.

In another sign of rapprochement, Daniel Rogers, the head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, visited New Delhi this past weekend for a meeting of international intelligence heads hosted by India's National Security Council Secretariat.

The US and the UK intelligence chiefs also attended the conference, which was held behind closed doors.

In the wake of the Nijjar row, both countries expelled each other's top diplomats — known as high commissioners — and suspended trade negotiations. But even before the row went public, New Delhi had complained to the Canadian government about the activities of Sikh hard-liners in the diaspora, accusing the activists of trying to revive the insurgency in India's Punjab state.

Trudeau had openly clashed with New Delhi since September 2023 when he linked the death of a Sikh separatist leader and Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar to Indian government agents
PHOTO: PTI

Canada is home to the world's largest Sikh diaspora community, with about 800,000 people, roughly 2 per cent of the national population.

Nijjar himself was a proponent of the "Khalistan Movement," which calls for a Sikh homeland by carving out an ethno-religious state in the Punjab region.

But recent informal contacts between former diplomats and experts from both nations suggest there is momentum to put these controversial issues aside, and instead focus on mutual interests such as trade, investment and fighting climate change.

David McKinnon, a former senior Canadian diplomat, believes the new US administration might inadvertently help Ottawa and New Delhi to bury the hatchet.

Canadians, according to McKinnon, are now focused on a future that is not so dependent on the US and keen on expanding relations with the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

Ajay Bisaria, India's former envoy to Canada, agrees that Carney's arrival is a "natural inflection point" to reset ties as Canada prepares for an election later this year.

"The pathway could include resuming high commissioners, inviting India to a G7 summit that Canada will host in June and progressing a trade agreement. All this should become politically more attractive, given the broader geopolitical problems that Canada now has with the US and continues to have with China," said Bisaria.

However, he warned that Canada's new leadership might be so focused on economic challenges triggered by Donald Trump's tariffs and trade demands that the diplomatic reset with India takes a back seat.

Who will make the first move? Carney is a citizen of Canada, the UK and Ireland, although he has recently signaled he would renounce his British and his Irish passport. He has formerly served as governor of the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England, and stabilizing Canada's trade ties is likely to be high on his list of priorities."Canada needs India to diversify its economic profile, and New Delhi would also benefit from a trade treaty with Canada," Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, founder of Indian independent research forum Mantraya, told DW.

"While establishing such a treaty may take time, one way to assess whether progress is being made is to observe how quickly India appoints its high commissioner to Canada," she said. "Given the low level of relations between the two countries, any potential change is likely to be positive. However, for improvements to occur, the new prime minister must address India's primary concern with Ottawa: the perceived leniency towards Sikh militancy," said D'Souza.

—The DW

LETTERS write to us at salar@salar.news

SALAR سالار

What happens to Russia's seized $300B assets now?

With US support for Ukraine in doubt, Kyiv's European allies are weighing whether to seize USD 300 billion in frozen Russian assets and use the money to compensate Ukraine, support its military and help rebuild shattered homes and towns.

For now, the assets are still on ice, with opponents of seizure warning that the move could violate international law and destabilize financial markets.

Here are key things to know about the debate surrounding the Kremlin assets that were frozen shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion in early 2022:

What are the assets and where are they? Originally, the money was in short-term government bonds held as reserves for the Russian central bank. By now, most of the bonds have have matured and turned into cash piling up in custodian banks. Some 210 billion euros are in European Union member states, with the biggest chunk, some 183 billion euros, at Euroclear, a Belgian clearinghouse for financial transactions. Other amounts are at financial institutions in Great Britain, Japan, France, Canada, Switzerland, Australia and Singapore.

So far, the Group of Seven democracies have used the interest on the frozen cash to fund USD 50 billion in upfront assistance to Ukraine by borrowing against future interest income. That solution avoids legal and financial complications associated with outright confiscating the money and giving it to Ukraine.

Some of Ukraine's friends—Poland, the United Kingdom and the Baltic states Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — want to do more by taking the principal as well, given the enormous damage Russia has done. The World Bank estimates that reconstructing Ukraine will cost USD 524 billion over 10 years, already more than the total of the Russian assets. If one or more Western governments resist seizing the assets, the others that want to could still go ahead.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's allies in Europe are contemplating stepping up their financial aid in the wake of statements by US President Donald Trump that Europe must take care of its own security. Several of those allies—France and Belgium, for instance—are already saddled with troublesome debt levels above 100 per cent of gross domestic product.

European leaders say seizing the assets now would mean they couldn't be used as a bargaining chip in any peace deal or to help enforce a ceasefire. French Finance Minister Eric Lombard said Tuesday that it was against international law to seize assets in central banks. If Russian assets were seized without legal grounds, "it could pose a risk to European financial stability," he said.

Opponents of seizure also fear that countries and investors would hesitate to use European financial institutions if they are afraid assets could be seized, undermining the euro's role as an international currency for state reserves.

More specifically, governments worry that countries such as Saudi Arabia and China may sell European government bonds in response, said Elina Ribakova, an economist with the Bruegel think tank in Brussels. That would raise borrowing costs for governments already deep in debt.

Also looming over the issue are memories of the 2010-2012 European government debt crisis, in which borrowing costs spiked and raised concerns the euro currency could break up.

Some experts argue that seizure would be an appropriate "countermeasure." That's a specific legal term referring to an action that would normally be illegal but which is justified as a means to push Russia to stop its own violations of international law. Other scholars say confiscation would not be a legitimate countermeasure.

One reason: justifying a countermeasure as compensation for damages—instead of merely as pressure to behave—would be "a very significant expansion of the way we have used countermeasures in the past," said Ingrid Brunk, professor of international law at Vanderbilt University Law School. "I would term it as a violation of international law on countermeasures."

Additionally, Brunk said international law grants strong protection to central bank reserves against seizure — a principle that has been "absolutely sacrosanct for a century."

Kremlin has repeatedly warned that the seizure of Russian assets would be illegitimate and erode investors' confidence. Russia could, in theory, seize the assets of the estimated 1,800 Western companies that continue to do business in Russia. Recent legislation would enable state seizure of companies based in countries designated as "unfriendly," Russian news media report.

However, there's less to seize on Russia's end. Foreign companies have suffered more than USD 170 billion in losses since 2022, often as they decided to leave Russia or scale back there, according to the Kyiv School of Economics. *—PTI*

Russia could, in theory, seize the assets of the estimated 1,800 Western companies that continue to do business in Russia
PHOTO: PTI

Israel's multiple strikes on Gaza threaten an all-out war, here's why

The relative calm of a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came to an abrupt end on Tuesday, when Israel launched dozens of attacks on targets across the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian hospital officials say more than 250 people have been killed, including women and children. Israel says the operation is open-ended and expected to expand, raising fears of the 17-month-old war fully reigniting.

Here's what to know about how the strikes came about and what might come next.

What happened to the ceasefire?

The ceasefire agreed to in mid-January was a three-phase plan, the first of which actually ended two weeks ago.

Israel balked at entering substantive negotiations over the second phase, which were meant to lead to a long-term ceasefire, a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the return of all hostages taken by Hamas in its October 7, 2023 attack on Israel that started the war.

The ceasefire was supposed to continue as long as talks over the second phase went on, according to the agreement reached after more than a year of negotiations mediated by the United States, Egypt and Qatar.

During the first phase, Hamas returned 25 living hostages and the remains of eight others in exchange for the release of nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Israeli forces also withdrew to buffer zones inside Gaza, and hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians returned to northern Gaza.

No further hostage releases were called for under the agreement until the second phase.

Hundreds of aid trucks had been entering daily. But two weeks ago, Israel cut off all food, medicine, fuel, electricity and other supplies to the territory's around 2 million people to pressure Hamas to accept a new proposal.

The new plan would require Hamas to release half its remaining hostages — the militant group's main bargaining chip — in exchange for a ceasefire extension and a promise to negotiate a lasting truce.

Israel made no mention of releasing more Palestinian prisoners — a key component of the first phase.

Hamas refused the new proposal, accusing Israel of trying to sabotage the existing agreement.

Is the ceasefire over? Unless mediators step in, Israel's surprise attack could mean a full return to fighting in a 17-month war that has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and caused widespread destruction across Gaza.

Smoke rises following an Israeli bombardment in the northern Gaza Strip as seen from southern Israel on Tuesday
PHOTO: PTI

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has repeatedly threatened to resume the war, said he ordered the strikes because of Hamas' rejection of the new proposal. He said Israel "will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength".

The White House said it had been consulted and voiced support for Israel's actions.

Hamas accused Netanyahu of upending the ceasefire agreement and exposing the remaining hostages "to an unknown fate".

In a statement, it called on mediators to hold Israel "fully responsible for violating and overturning the agreement".

The attack came during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. No major fighting has occurred in Gaza since the ceasefire took hold on January 19, but Israeli strikes have killed dozens of Palestinians who the military said had entered unauthorised areas, engaged in militant activities or otherwise violated the truce.

What is Netanyahu's situation? Netanyahu has come under mounting domestic pressure, with mass protests planned over his handling of the hostage crisis and his decision to fire the head of Israel's internal security agency.

Families of hostages still held in Gaza expressed concern Tuesday over their loved ones. "We are shocked, angry, and terrified by the deliberate dismantling of the process to return our loved ones from the terrible captivity of Hamas," the Hostages Families Forum said.

But Netanyahu has also faced demands from his hard-line allies not to allow any deal in Gaza that falls short of Hamas' destruction. Negotiations with Hamas over a second phase could have brought pressure for compromises over how Gaza will be ruled in the future.

Netanyahu's critics say his firing of the security agency chief and a string of other dismissals are part of a broader campaign aimed at undermining independent government institutions.

They say he's doing this to maintain power while on trial for alleged corruption and facing public pressure to accept his own responsibility for policy failures in the lead-up to Hamas' surprise attack on October 7, 2023.

What else is happening? A resumption of fighting in Gaza could have repercussions around the region.Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels denounced the Israeli strikes, saying "the Palestinian people will not be left alone in this battle" — indicating a possible resumption of the Houthis' strikes on shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

The United States launched a new airstrikes over the weekend targeting the Houthis in Yemen in retaliation for its attacks on shipping. At least 53 people were reported killed.

US President Donald Trump on Monday warned Iran would "suffer the consequences" for any further Houthi attacks, threatening to widen the conflict further.

New Gaza violence could also shake the ceasefire that Israel reached with Hezbollah in November, which stopped months of deadly exchanges of fire over the Israeli-Lebanon border. *—PTI*

Truce shattered; Israeli strikes kill 413 in Gaza

White House says it was consulted, voices support to Israel's surprise bombardments

GAZA STRIP, 18 MARCH

Israel launched airstrikes across the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, killing at least 413 Palestinians, including women and children, according to hospital officials.

The White House said it had been consulted and voiced support for Israel's actions.

The surprise bombardment shattered a ceasefire in place since January and threatened to fully reignite the 17-month-old war.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the strikes after Hamas refused Israeli demands to change the ceasefire agreement. Officials said the operation was open-ended and was expected to expand.

The Israeli military ordered people to evacuate eastern Gaza and head toward the centre of the territory, indicating that Israel could soon launch renewed ground operations.

"Israel will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength," Netanyahu's office said.

The attack in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan could resume a war that has already killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and caused widespread destruction across Gaza. It also raised questions about the fate of the roughly two dozen Israeli hostages held by Hamas who are believed to still be alive.

A Hamas top member said Netanyahu's decision to return to war amounts to a "death sentence" for the remaining hostages. Izzat al-Risheq accused Netanyahu of launching the strikes to try and save his far-right governing coalition and called on mediators to "reveal facts" on who broke the truce.

Hamas said at least four senior officials were killed in Tuesday's strikes. There were no reports of any attacks by Hamas several hours after the bombardment.

The strikes came as Netanyahu comes under mounting domestic pressure, with mass protests planned over his handling of the hostage crisis and his decision to fire the head of Israel's internal security agency. His latest testimony in a long-running corruption trial was cancelled after the strikes.

The group representing families of the captives, in a statement, accused the government of choosing "to give up on the hostages.

"We are shocked, angry and terrified by the deliberate dismantling of the process to return our loved ones from the terrible captivity of Hamas," it said. —*PTI*

Mourners gather around the bodies of Palestinians who were killed in Israeli airstrikes, as they are brought to Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City **PHOTO: PTI**

Pak complains to Kabul over Baloch train hijacking

ISLAMABAD, 18 MARCH

Pakistan formally lodged a strong protest with Afghanistan over the use of its soil in the recent train hijacking by Balochistan Liberation Army militants in the western region in which 21 civilians and four soldiers were killed. Pakistan had stated that it had found evidence of attackers being in constant contact with their handlers in Afghanistan. The Express Tribune reported quoting sources that a senior Afghan diplomat was summoned to the Foreign Office on Monday to register their protest and demanded the perpetrators be brought to justice. While a recent UNSC report pointed to a close nexus between the Afghanistan-based banned TTP and the BLA the Afghan Taliban, however, has rejected these allegations. —*PTI*

Aus closes beaches as foam, dead fish wash ashore

MELBOURNE, 18 MARCH

An Australian state closed two beaches after dozens of dead fish were washed ashore and an unusual off-white foam washed ashore while surfers reported feeling unwell, officials said on Tuesday. South Australian Environment Protection Authority principal scientific officer Sam Gaylard said a microalgal bloom created by unusual weather conditions was suspected to have sickened surfers and marine life. Although occasional isolated blooms do occur he called it unusual at this scale. Waitpinga Beach and neighbouring Parsons Beach, both south of the South Australia state capital Adelaide, have been closed to the public since Monday in response to a "fish mortality event in the area", the Department for Environment and Water said in a statement. —*AP*

China lost $7B from Sri Lankan debt restructuring

COLOMBO, 18 MARCH

China has suffered a loss of USD 7 billion from Sri Lanka's external debt restructuring, a media report said on Tuesday. The state-owned Daily News quoted Chinese Ambassador to Colombo Qi Zhenhong as saying that China was Sri Lanka's first bilateral creditor to enter a restructuring agreement in October 2023. "However the public does not know about these details. This is because we do not shout about our assistance to Sri Lanka." Sri Lanka went on to restructure USD 46 billion of external credit when the island nation announced its first sovereign default in the economic crisis of 2022. The ambassador expressed hope that both China and India can work jointly to develop Sri Lanka's northern province. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

King Charles III to meet Pope Francis during Vatican visit

LONDON, 18 MARCH

King Charles III is scheduled to have an audience with Pope Francis during a state visit next month to the Vatican, suggesting the Holy See is optimistic the pontiff will be back at work by then, barring any setbacks in his recovery from double pneumonia. Charles' three-day trip begins April 7 and it will also include events in Italy and its capital, Rome, which surrounds Vatican City, according to details released by Buckingham Palace on Tuesday. The visit to the Vatican is symbolic of efforts to build closer ties between the Catholic Church and the Church of England, which split from Rome in the 16th century during the reign of King Henry VIII. The palace separately confirmed that Charles wrote privately to the pope when he has been hospitalized since February 14. —*AP*

Trump lifts intel cover of Jr Bidens

WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

President Donald Trump said Monday he was ending "immediately" the Secret Service protection details assigned to Democrat Joe Biden's "adult" children, which the former president had extended to July shortly before leaving office in January.

The Republican president on social media objected to what he said were 18 agents assigned to Hunter Biden's protective detail while in South Africa this week. He said Ashley Biden has 13 agents assigned to her detail and that she too "will be taken off the list."

There was no immediate reaction from the former president's office.

Former presidents and their spouses receive life-long Secret Service protection under federal law, but the protection afforded to their immediate families over the age of 16 ends when they leave office, though both Trump and Biden extended the details for their children for six months before leaving office.

Hunter and Ashley Biden **PHOTO: X**

While touring the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Monday afternoon, a reporter asked Trump if he would revoke the protection for the former president's son.

"We have done that with many. I would say if there are 18 with Hunter Biden, that will be something I'll look at this afternoon," Trump said, who added this was the first time he heard about the matter. "I'm going to take a look at that," he said. —*PTI*

Donald Trump **PHOTO: X**

Lebanon, Syria agree on truce post clashes

BEIRUT, 18 MARCH

Lebanese and Syrian defence officials reached an agreement late on Monday for a ceasefire to halt two days of clashes along the border, Syria's state-run SANA news agency reported. The agreement also stipulates "enhanced coordination and cooperation between the two sides," the statement from the Syrian Ministry of Defense said.

Lebanon's president on Monday ordered troops to retaliate against the source of gunfire from the Syrian side of the border after more deadly fighting erupted overnight along the frontier. Lebanon's health ministry reported that seven citizens were killed and another 52 injured in the clashes, including a four-year-old girl.

The fighting took place after Syria's interim government accused militants from Lebanon's Hezbollah group of crossing into Syria on Saturday, abducting three soldiers and killing them on Lebanese soil. Hezbollah denied involvement and some other reports pointed to local clans in the border region that are not directly affiliated with Hezbollah but have been involved in cross-border smuggling.

It was the most serious cross-border fighting since the ouster of former President Bashar Assad in December. Syrian News Channel said the Syrian army shelled "Hezbollah gatherings that killed Syrian soldiers" along the border.

Hezbollah on Sunday denied involvement. —*PTI*

Syrian troops gather in Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali village near the Lebanon border on Monday **PHOTO: PTI**

DEPORTED DOC BACKED HEZBOLLAH

BOSTON, 18 MARCH

Homeland Security officials on Monday said a doctor from Lebanon, who was deported over the weekend despite having a US visa, "openly admitted" to supporting a Hezbollah leader and attending his funeral.

The department's statement, posted on social media, provides a possible explanation for Dr Rasha Alawieh's deportation, which has sparked widespread alarm, especially after a federal judge ordered that she not be removed before a hearing. Government lawyers have said customs officials did not get word until after Alawieh was sent back to Lebanon. "A visa is a privilege not a right," Homeland Security said in the statement. —*PTI*

BOWMAN IS FED RESERVE REGULATOR

WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

Michelle Bowman **PHOTO: PTI**

US President Donald Trump on Monday nominated Michelle Bowman to oversee the Federal Reserve's financial regulatory efforts. Bowman was appointed by Trump in 2018 to serve on the Fed's governing board. She replaces Michael Barr as the Fed's Vice Chair for Supervision, after Barr quit to avoid a legal fight had Trump carried out his threat to fire him. Barr, however, stayed on the Fed board, forcing Trump to pick from one of the existing governors. —*PTI*

SINGER SHOT DEAD

Peru declares emergency amid surge of violence

LIMA, 18 MARCH

Peru's President declared a state of emergency in the capital on Monday and ordered the deployment of soldiers to help police address a surge of violence, amid widespread outcry a day after the killing of a popular singer.

President Dina Boluarte's government published a decree saying that the state of emergency will last 30 days, and authorities will restrict some rights, including the freedom of assembly and movement. That means the police and the army would be able to detain people without a judicial order.

Peru has seen an increase of killings, violent extortion and attacks on public places in recent months. Police reported 459 killings from 1 January to 16 March, and 1,909 extortion reports in January alone. But outrage crested after the killing Sunday of Paul Flores, the 39-year-old lead singer of the cumbia band Armonia 10.

In Congress, opposition lawmakers requested a vote of no confidence against Interior Minister Juan Jose Santivanez for what they say is a lack of a plan to fight rising violence. The vote is expected to be discussed in the Congress' plenary later this week.

Flores was shot to death early Sunday when assailants attacked the bus he and bandmates were traveling after a concert in Lima.

The attack against the popular singer was not the only violent event over the weekend. On Saturday, an object exploded at a restaurant in the capital, injuring at least 11 people. —*PTI*

B'desh govt rejects claims of minority persecution

DHAKA, 18, MARCH

The interim government of Professor Muhammad Yunus refuted US National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard's remarks on alleged persecution of minority communities in Bangladesh saying her comments were "not based on evidence or specific allegations" but "misleading and damaging" to the country.

"They (Gabbard's comments) paint an entire nation with a broad and unjustified brush," the chief adviser's office said on a verified Facebook post at around midnight Monday.

Gabbard alleged that "persecution and killing" of religious minorities in Bangladesh and that "the threat of Islamic terrorists" in the country was "rooted" in the "ideology and objective" to "rule and govern with an Islamist caliphate". —*PTI*

Parents of missing Indian student ask Dominica to declare her dead

NEW YORK, 18 MARCH

The family of missing 20-year-old Indian student Sudiksha Konanki has asked police in the Dominican Republic to declare her dead, according to US media reports.

Konanki, a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the United States, was last seen on 6 March at the Riu Republic Resort in Punta Cana town.

She has gone missing while on vacation in the Dominican Republic and US federal law enforcement agencies are working with authorities in the Caribbean country in the probe into her disappearance.

Despite an extensive search, her body has not been found.

Dominican Republic National Police spokesperson Diego Pesqueira said Konanki's family has sent the agency a letter requesting a declaration of death, acknowledging there is no suspected foul play involved in Konanki's presumed death after she vanished from a Punta Cana beach in the early hours of March 6, New York Post reported.

The father and mother also wrote they trust the authorities' probe into the case and noted Riibe, the last person to see the young woman alive, has cooperated with investigators, sources said.

Konanki's parents in the same letter said that they understand that certain legal procedures must be followed for their request, but that they are prepared to comply with any necessary formalities or documentation, sources were quoted as saying by the ABC News. —*PTI*

Konanki was last seen on 6 March at the Riu Republic Resort in Punta Cana town **PHOTO: X**

CASES DOUBLE IN A YEAR

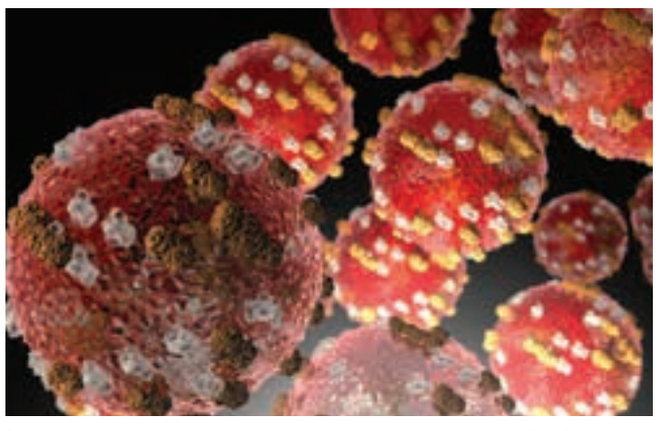
Europe's 2024 measles outbreak worst since 1997: WHO

SOUTHAMPTON, 18 MARCH

Europe has had the highest number of measles cases since 1997, according to a new report from the World Health Organisation (WHO). There were 127,350 cases in 2024 – about double the number from 2023.

"Measles is back, and it's a wake-up call," says Dr Hans Henri P Kluge, WHO regional director for Europe. "Without high vaccination rates, there is no health security." Last year, there were 38 deaths from measles.

Transmission is similar to COVID, with respiratory droplets and aerosols (airborne transmission) spreading the virus between people. The infection produces a rash and fever in mild cases, and encephalitis (brain swelling), pneumonia and blindness in severe cases.



Mortality rates in developed countries hover between one in 1,000 and one in 5 0 cases **PHOTO: X**

Hospitalisation and deaths are overwhelmingly high in unvaccinated people, with mortality rates in developed countries hover between one in 1,000 and one in 5,000 measles cases.

Each person infected with measles will, on average, spread the virus to between 12 and 18 other people. This is more infectious than COVID.

In 2022, the WHO had described measles as an "imminent threat in every region of the world".

These new stark figures from WHO Europe are an inevitable consequence of lower vaccination rates. Measles is almost entirely vaccine-preventable, with two doses providing greater than 99 per cent protection against infection. The vaccine has an excellent safety record, with severe harm being extremely rare.

The proportion of the population that needs to be vaccinated to keep local transmission low and prevent outbreaks – something that is called "herd immunity" – is around 95 per cent. —*PTI*

No fee for Harvard students with less than $2M income

MASSACHUSETTS, 18 MARCH

Harvard University announced an expansion of its financial aid programme, ensuring free tuition for students from families earning up to $2,00,000 annually. The move taking effect from the 2025 academic year, is part of the university's ongoing commitment to making education more accessible, particularly for middle-income households.

Harvard President Alan M Garber emphasised that this initiative would enrich the academic experience by fostering a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. —*Agencies*

Gold continues record run, crosses ₹91K level

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Gold prices climbed by Rs 500 to hit another record high of Rs 91,250 per 10 grams in the national capital on Tuesday driven by sustained buying by stockists and retailers amid a strong trend overseas, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

On Monday, the precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity rallied by Rs 1,300 to hit a fresh peak of Rs 90,750 per 10 grams. The yellow metal of 99.5 per cent purity rised by Rs 450 to hit a lifetime high of Rs 90,800 per 10 grams against the previous close of Rs 90,350 per 10 grams. However, silver prices traded flat at Rs 1,02,500 per kg, also a historic high. —*PTI*

Rupee settles 26p higher at 86.55 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

The rupee appreciated for the third consecutive session and registered gains of 26 paise to close at 86.55 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, amid positive domestic equity markets and a weak American currency. Forex traders said the US dollar declined on disappointing economic data from the US. Moreover, the strength of the Asian currencies also supported the rupee. However, a surge in crude oil prices capped the gains. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee witnessed high volatility. It opened at 86.71 then touched the intraday high of 86.54 and the low of 86.78 against the greenback. The unit ended the session at 86.55 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 26 paise from its previous closing level. —*PTI*

Rupee's slide may increase prices of Merc automobiles

UDAIPUR, 18 MARCH

Mercedes-Benz India is considering a price hike in April due to the rupee's continued slide against the euro. Managing Director & CEO Santosh Iyer stated that the company may increase prices if the rupee's value against the euro remains low. The rupee has been witnessing a continuous fall this year, reaching a record low of 95.13 against the euro on 12 March. As of Tuesday, the exchange rate stood at Rs 94.55 per euro. Iyer noted that the company needs to react to adverse fluctuations in the forex exchange rate. A five-rupee increase in the exchange rate translates to a 5-8% increase, which may lead to a price hike. Mercedes-Benz India expects luxury car sales to remain under stress for at least two quarters due to muted demand. However, the company still anticipates growth momentum to continue in the domestic market, albeit at a slower pace. —*PTI*

Mumbai flights to cost more as MIAL to hike user fee

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

From the next financial year, flying from Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) is set to become more expensive, as the private operator Mumbai International Airport Ltd (MIAL) has proposed a substantial rise in the User Development Fee (UDF). International passengers will see their fee increase from Rs 187 to Rs 650, a hike of Rs 463, while domestic travellers will incur a new UDF of Rs 325. This new tariff card is pending approval from the Airport Economic Regulatory Authority (AERA). In a bid to support airlines, MIAL has also suggested a reduction of 35 per cent in landing and parking charges for the fourth control period (FY2024-2029). As the second busiest airport in India, CSMIA, which managed 52.82 million passengers last fiscal year, is planning extensive modernisation to enhance passenger convenience amid its proposed infrastructure upgrades. AERA will hold a stakeholders' meeting on 25 March to gather opinions on these tariff changes —*PTI*

Markets bounce back as Sensex jumps 901 points

Nifty sees notable increase of 265.9 points, reaching 22,774

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

The BSE benchmark index Sensex experienced a significant surge on Tuesday, jumping over 900 points to reclaim the 75,000-mark during morning trade. This upward trend was largely driven by a positive trend in global markets and substantial buying activity in bank stocks.

Extending its rally from the previous day, the 30-share BSE Sensex rose by 901.43 points to reach 75,071.38. Similarly, the NSE Nifty witnessed a notable increase of 265.9 points, reaching 22,774.65.

Among the Sensex constituents, several stocks posted significant gains, including Zomato, ICICI Bank, Asian Paints, Larsen & Toubro, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Motors, NTPC, Adani Ports, and Hindustan Unilever. Conversely, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance, Reliance Industries, and IndusInd Bank were among the laggards.

Bajaj Finserv's shares declined by 2 per cent following the announcement of its acquisition of a 26% stake in its insurance businesses, Bajaj Allianz General Insurance Company and Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance Company.

Asian markets, including Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, were trading in the positive territory, while US markets ended higher on Monday. According to V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at Geojit Financial Services, "Broad indications are that the market has bottomed out, although further corrections cannot be completely ruled out." He highlighted positive domestic cues, such as rebounding FY25 Q3 GDP growth, increased IIP, gross tax collection, and declining trade deficit and CPI inflation. However, Vijayakumar cautioned that global headwinds from tariff wars may counter domestic tailwinds, preventing the market from reaching higher levels on a sustained basis. —*PTI*

TALKS AT FINAL STAGE

LIC eyes stake in health insurance

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Life insurance behemoth LIC is confident of buying a stake in a health insurer in the next two weeks, its chief executive Siddhartha Mohanty said on Tuesday.

Without identifying the company it will be buying a stake in, Mohanty said the state-owned company is in final stage of talks and hoped that a deal gets announced before March 31. "It is a natural choice for LIC to be in health insurance, discussion is going on at final stage," he said at the GCA25 event here.

Mohanty said the LIC will not buy a controlling stake of 51 per cent or more in the target company and the exact quantum of the stake buy depends on factors like the decision of LIC board and valuations.

At present, life insurance companies are not allowed to offer health covers which include covering hospitalisation and other expenses for the insured. There was a suggestion for a composite licence for insurers, but no announcement was made in this regard in the Union Budget.

As per some media reports, LIC is said to be eyeing a stake in ManipalCigna in a deal pegged at Rs 4,000 crore.

Meanwhile, the managing director and chief executive of the largest life insurer said there has been a "slowdown" in the growth of life insurance, particularly in terms of penetration lately.

The slowdown has happened even as there has been a focus on enhancing the principles of insurance facilitation and moving towards a principle-based regulatory framework, he said, adding that this "dual reality" calls for a "comprehensive review" of LIC's approach.

In the third quarter of FY25, LIC reported a 9 per cent decline in its net premium income at Rs 1.06 lakh crore, even though the standalone net profit increased 17 per cent to Rs 11,056 crore. —*PTI*

14,000 AMAZON CORPORATES TO LOSE JOBS AS AI CUTS COSTS

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

E-commerce giant Amazon Inc is reportedly ready to fire some 14,000 managerial employees early this year. This move comes amid the company's cost cutting measures.As per media reports on 18 March, Amazon aims to save between $2.1 billion and $3.6 billion annually after cutting down its workforce by 13 per cent. These job cuts will bring down the number of managers in the firm to 91,936, compared to the current level of 1,05,770 managers. —*Agencies*

'India thrives in real estate'

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

India demonstrated substantial growth in real estate investments during the second half of 2024, experiencing an impressive 88 per cent year-on-year increase to reach USD 3.0B, according to a Colliers report. Office assets accounted for the largest share of investments, at 47 per cent, while industrial and logistics properties garnered 27 per cent.

Mumbai emerged as a significant hub, attracting almost half of the total investments chiefly due to office asset acquisitions. Badal Yagnik, CEO of Colliers India, highlighted that institutional investments in Indian real estate rose by 22 per cent, totalling USD 6.5 billion in 2024. He expressed optimism regarding continued growth into 2025, driven by positive economic outlooks and investor sentiment. —*ANI*

HARD BARGAIN

Rights plea against Adani Green Energy in Sri Lanka withdrawn

COLOMBO, 18 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Five fundamental rights petitions against Adani Green Energy's projects in northeastern Sri Lanka have been withdrawn by the petitioners. This development follows the Attorney General's motion in response to Adani's notice to the Board of Investment regarding the cancellation of its wind energy initiatives.

The Indian conglomerate had previously announced its intention to withdraw from the renewable wind energy projects in Mannar and Pooneryn, which had been approved by the former cabinet in May 2023. The petitions, filed in 2024, raised concerns about environmental risks and transparency issues surrounding the projects.

Adani Group's exit comes after the new government, led by President Anura Kumar Dissanayake, initiated a review of the projects and sought to renegotiate the power purchase agreement. The pricing set by the previous government at eight cents was deemed excessive, with the current administration striving to reduce this figure to below six cents.

The National People's Power (NPP) government had committed to cancelling the project in light of the upcoming September presidential elections. In late December, the newly formed cabinet opted to pursue negotiations over the purchasing price. Govt spokesman Nalinda Jayathissa reaffirmed the administration's determination to secure lower unit prices for energy procurement. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

SEBI CLEARS PATH FOR LG INDIA AND INNOVISION IPOS

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

LG Electronics India and Innovision have received approval from the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to launch their Initial Public Offerings (IPOs). This development enables the companies to raise funds from the public market.

LG Electronics India's IPO involves the parent company selling over Rs 10.18 crore shares, accounting for a 15% stake. Although the company hasn't disclosed the total issue size, sources estimate it to be around Rs 15,000 crore. This will be the second South Korean company to tap into the Indian stock market, following Hyundai Motors India's listing in October last year.

LG Electronics India manufactures and sells products, including washing machines, refrigerators, and LED TV panels. The company has manufacturing units in Noida and Pune. As the public issue is completely an offer for sale (OFS), LG Electronics India will not receive any IPO proceeds. The funds raised will go to the South Korean parent.

Innovision's proposed IPO is a mix of fresh issuance of Rs 255 crore and an OFS of up to 17.72 equity shares by promoters. The company plans to use the proceeds from the fresh issuance to pay off debt, fund working capital requirements, and cover general corporate purposes. Innovision provides manpower services, toll plaza management, and skill development training to clients across India. The approvals come as SEBI returned the draft IPO documents of technology-driven engineering services and solutions company Neilsoft without disclosing any reason. —*PTI*

Tech Mahindra and Google Cloud partner to deliver

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Tech Mahindra, a leading IT services firm, has expanded its long-term partnership with Google Cloud to accelerate the adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions for global enterprises. The collaboration aims to help businesses modernize their infrastructure and data architecture while maximizing returns on investment from their AI-powered cloud solutions.

The partnership will leverage Tech Mahindra's domain expertise and Google Cloud's AI capabilities to develop tailored industry solutions for sectors such as communications, healthcare, and manufacturing. These solutions will empower businesses to navigate operational complexities, enhance efficiency, and unlock new growth opportunities while adhering to evolving regulatory standards.

Tech Mahindra has invested in talent up skilling and advanced delivery capabilities to enhance its partnership with Google Cloud. The company has also established dedicated delivery centers in Mexico, focusing on providing Google Cloud-centric solutions.

As a premier systems integrator and Google Cloud Partner, Tech Mahindra boasts 2,000+ certified resources and 10,000+ trained engineers deployed across 75+ programs globally. Kevin Ichhpurani, President of Global Partner Ecosystem & Channels at Google Cloud, stated that the partnership will provide customers with the necessary managed services to successfully build and deploy AI agents using Google Cloud's AI development platform.

The partnership is expected to drive innovation and growth for global enterprises, enabling them to harness the power of AI and cloud technology. —*PTI*

Barclays commits ₹2.3K cr for India operations

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

British bank Barclays has announced a substantial capital infusion of Rs 2,300 crore into its Indian operations, reaffirming its long-term commitment to the country's rapidly growing economy.

This investment will bolster the bank's balance sheet and facilitate expansion across its investment and private banking sectors, enabling it to reach a broader clientele, including corporate clients and ultra-high-net-worth individuals.

This follows a previous investment of Rs 3,000 crore in 2021, bringing Barclays' total capital in India to over Rs 12,400 crore. Jaideep Khanna, Barclays' interim head of markets for Asia Pacific and CEO for India, highlighted the attractive growth opportunities in India's economic landscape as a key motivation for this latest investment. —*PTI*

SINGAPORE, INDIA DISCUSS GREEN SHIPPING PACT

SINGAPORE, 18 MARCH

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BUGS IN THE BOOKS

Moody's keeps IndusInd Bank credit under lens

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Moody's has placed IndusInd Bank's baseline credit assessment under review for potential downgrade, amid concerns over internal control discrepancies within its derivative accounts and retail loan stress. The bank recently disclosed a significant accounting error amounting to USD 175 million linked to currency derivatives, contributing to a share price decline of over 28 per cent, following the Reserve Bank of India's decision to extend CEO Sumant Kathpalia's term by just one year instead of the three recommended by the bank's board.

Moody's has maintained IndusInd Bank's Ba1 long-term foreign and local currency deposit ratings, along with a stable outlook, while stating that the review is prompted by discrepancies within the derivatives portfolio. These issues could result in a potential loss of up to Rs 2,000 crore in the quarter ending March 2025.

In its assessment, Moody's voiced concerns regarding the bank's retail unsecured loan portfolio stress, which may impact profitability, capital, and funding. The agency also noted uncertainty surrounding leadership changes, emphasising that the baseline credit assessment's stability depends on resolving issues related to senior management and financial controls.

Despite these challenges, Moody's expressed confidence in IndusInd Bank's robust capital position and stable funding, which could help mitigate immediate credit risks. The bank engaged PwC as an external advisor to review the discrepancies, with findings expected within three months.

Meanwhile, the bank's asset quality remains under pressure, with its gross non-performing loans (NPL) ratio rising to 2.3 per cent by December 2024. The microfinance and credit card segments are experiencing the highest levels of stress, and further deterioration is anticipated. —*ANI*

RBI, Bank of Mauritius sign local currency pact

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

PHOTO: X

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Bank of Mauritius (BOM) have signed a significant Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at promoting the use of the Indian Rupee (INR) and Mauritian Rupee (MUR) in bilateral trade. The agreement was formalised by RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra and BOM Governor Rama Krishna Sithanen in Port Louis, Mauritius, on 12 March, in the presence of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mauritian Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam.

The MoU establishes a framework for the utilisation of local currencies in cross-border transactions, encompassing all current account transactions and permissible capital account transactions as agreed by both nations. This initiative allows exporters and importers to invoice and settle payments in their respective currencies, fostering the development of a market for the INR-MUR currency pair.

By facilitating transactions in local currencies, the RBI and BOM aim to optimise costs and reduce settlement times. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

Rory McIlroy wins and Masters expectations rise

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, 18 MARCH

Rory McIlroy winning The Players Championship gave him so much of what he doesn't need. The $4.5 million prize is the largest for any tournament in the world. It pushed McIlroy's career earnings on the PGA Tour alone to just over $99.7 million, second only to Tiger. The perks include a five-year exemption on the PGA Tour (his 28 wins make him a life member) and three-year exemptions to the majors (he's been eligible for all of them since 2009). It also raised expectations for McIlroy going into the Masters.He probably doesn't need those, either.Even at the TPC Sawgrass for the premier championship of the PGA Tour, the week for McIlroy started and ended with talk about the Masters.—*PTI*

Time for India to win hockey WC gold again: Ashok

NEW DELHI, 30 OCT

World Cup-winning striker Ashok Kumar, son of the legendary Major Dhyan Chand, on Tuesday said it is high time India reclaimed hockey's top prize to commemorate the golden jubilee of its historic 1975 World Cup victory.Fifty years ago, on March 15, India won their first and only hockey World Cup in Kuala Lumpur under the captaincy of Ajitpal Singh with Kumar scoring the winning goal.Kumar, 75, feels Indian hockey is back to its best after two back-to-back bronze medal wins in the Olympics."It was different when we used to play hockey. We played on natural grass but now the game is played on astro-turf. So the dynamics have changed but the skill set remains the same," Kumar said during a book launch function to celebrate 50 years of India's World Cup-winning feat. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

Happy I helped Mirra win at Indian Wells: LeBron

INDIAN WELLS, 18 MARCH

NBA star LeBron James said he was happy to have helped Mirra Andreeva after the Russian teenager credited one of his past interviews where he talked about the importance of mental strength for inspiring her to victory at Indian Wells on Sunday. Andreeva beat world number one Aryna Sabalenka 2-6, 6-4, 6-3 in the final to clinch her second straight WTA 1000 title after winning the Dubai Championship last month. Andreeva said in an interview with Tennis Channel on Monday that she had taken James' comments to heart.—*PTI*

Racist comment: Preston's Osmajic charged by FA

SYDNEY, 18 MARCH

Preston North End's Montenegro forward Milutin Osmajic was charged by the Football Association (FA) on Monday for an alleged racist remark towards Burnley midfielder Hannibal Mejbri last month.Mejbri complained to the referee after Osmajic made the alleged racist comment during the 0-0 Championship (second-tier) draw between the two sides at Deepdale on 15 February. Preston said Osmajic strongly denies the allegation."It's alleged that the forward acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting words towards an opposing player," the FA said in a statement announcing the charge.—*PTI*

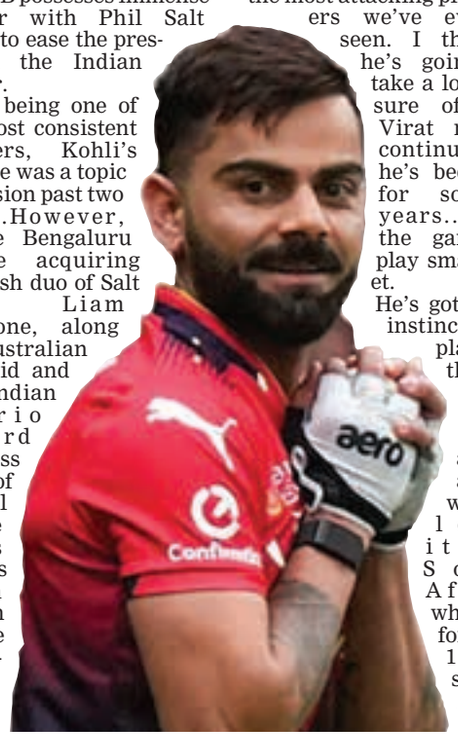
Kohli won't have to up his strike rate: De Villiers

Virat needs to continue what he's been doing for so many years

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

South African batting great AB de Villiers believes Virat Kohli should focus on playing smart cricket and continue controlling the game this season as RCB possesses immense firepower with Phil Salt expected to ease the pressure on the Indian superstar.

Despite being one of RCB's most consistent performers, Kohli's strike rate was a topic of discussion past two seasons.However, with the Bengaluru franchise acquiring the English duo of Salt and Liam Livingstone, along with Australian Tim David and West Indian Romario Shepherd all fearless strikers of the ball de Villiers feels Kohli can play with more freedom."Virat seems to be enjoying his cricket.



I don't think he's going to have to up his strike rate batting with Phil Salt," de Villiers said on JioStar Press Room on Tuesday."Salt is one of the most attacking players we've ever seen. I think he's going to take a lot of pressure off Virat. Virat needs to continue what he's been doing for so many years...control the game, and play smart cricket.

He's got the best instinct of any player out there. He knows when to up the ante a bit and when to lower it."The South African, who played for RCB for 11 seasons, said Kohli needs to ensure there are no batting collapses."Virat needs to be the captain of the batting department in this tournament and just keep things together, play smart cricket to make sure they don't find those collapses in the batting order."The former Proteas skipper feels that Kohli has been subjected to "unnecessary criticism over the last few seasons"."There's no doubt some of the outside noise has maybe influenced him a bit.

He's only human, he's got those doubts in his head."But the one thing about Virat is that he's always could, when it matters most, when he crosses that line for his team, blocks everything out and it's business time."With Faf du Plessis' departure, RCB enters the season with a new captain in Rajat Patidar.De Villiers opined that Patidar's biggest challenge would be dealing with self-doubt while stepping into the shoes of past captains like du Plessis and Kohli."His biggest challenge will be insecurity, stepping into the big boots of the past captains like Faf and Virat.. having Virat around and constantly almost doubting yourself." —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Samson joins RR practice session

Rajasthan Royals skipper Sanju Samson has joined his IPL team after completing his recovery from a finger surgery he underwent last month. The 30-year-old cricketer, who finished his rehabilitation at the Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru, attended the Royals' first practice session on Monday ahead of the upcoming season. Samson had suffered the injury after being struck by a bouncer from Jofra Archer during India's five-match T20I series against England. Following the injury, he underwent surgery to treat the damaged finger.

NZ beat Pak by five wickets to take a 2-0 lead

DUNEDIN, 18 MARCH

Tim Seifert blasted 45 from 22 balls and Finn Allen hit 38 from 16 as New Zealand cruised to a five-wicket win over Pakistan Tuesday in a rain-shortened second Twenty20 cricket international.

Captain Salman Ali Agha made 46 as Pakistan reached 135-9 in a match reduced to 15 overs per inning after a delay for a wet outfield.

Shaheen Sha Afridi then bowled a maiden to start New Zealand's innings. But Seifert and Allen hit seven of the next 12 balls for sixes as New Zealand launched an assault which helped them clinch the match and a 2-0 series lead with 11 balls remaining.

Seifert and Allen hit five sixes apiece as New Zealand sped towards its target. After the scoreless opening over Allen cleared the boundary on the first, third, and sixth balls of the second over, then Seifert struck sixes from the first two and the last two deliveries of the next over as New Zealand raced to 44-0.

New Zealand began its innings needing 136 runs from 90 balls. By the end of the five-over power play that target had been reduced to 70 runs from 60 balls. New Zealand was 87-2 when Allen followed Seifert to the pavilion in the seventh over.

Pakistan-Origin cricketer dies

Junail Zafar Khan, a club-level Pakistan-origin cricketer, has died after collapsing on the ground during a local match played in extreme heat at the Concordia College here. In his 40s, Khan was representing Old Concordians Cricket Club in a match against Prince Alfred Old Collegians last Saturday, news.com.au reported. After fielding for 40 overs and batting for seven, Khan collapsed around 4 pm.

Khushdil Shah fined for shoulder barge

Pakistan allrounder Khushdil Shah has been fined 50% of his match fee and incurred three demerit points for breaching the ICC code of conduct against New Zealand during the first Twenty20.

IYER WANTS TO MARK HIMSELF AT NUMBER THREE THIS IPL

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Having performed the role of a "silent hero" at number four in the title-winning Champions Trophy campaign, Shreyas Iyer wants to make a big impact at the number three position in this Indian Premier League season.

Iyer is not part of India's T20 set up but a productive debut season for Punjab Kings could revive his international career in the shortest format.

He captained Kolkata Knight Riders to the title last season where he batted in the middle-order. With Punjab Kings, an underperforming franchise since IPL's inception in 2008, Iyer feels no pressure to lead the team and just wants to win another trophy."We already know that IPL is an integral part of Indian cricket. And If I would want to mark myself at some position in T20, it would be number 3. And that's what I'm focusing on.

I wouldn't say that we are planning and thinking about what number I will be batting."This time I'm quite clear about that position. And I'm going to be focusing on that number. As long as coach approves of me," Iyer said at the season-opening media interaction seated alongside head coach Ricky Ponting. Fresh from a successful Champions Trophy, Iyer is excited about his reunion with Ponting. They both worked together at Delhi Capitals."I've worked with him for almost three years in a franchise. And I know how he thinks about every individual on and off the field. He supports everyone. —*PTI*

FAMILIES ON TOURS

Kapil advocates for balanced approach to players

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Legendary cricketer Kapil Dev is all for family travelling with cricketers on tours but has also called for a balanced approach in dealing with the contentious issue that has divided opinions.

Following India's 1-3 Test series loss to Australia, the BCCI issued a directive limiting the duration of family visits on tours lasting more than 45 days, allowing a maximum of 14 days of family time.

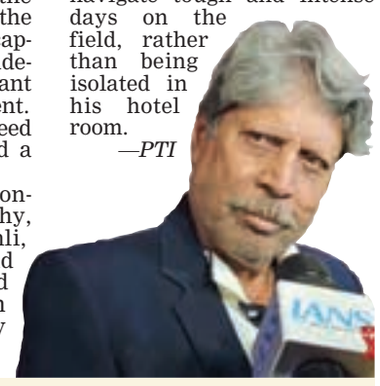
For shorter tours, players could bring their families for a maximum of one week.

"Well, I don't know, that's individual. I think it's the cricket board's call," said the 1983 World Cup-winning captain, speaking on the sidelines of the 'Kapil Dev Grant Thornton Invitational' event.

"My view is, yes, you need family. But you also need a team, all the time."

During the recently-concluded Champions Trophy, players like Virat Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja, and Mohammed Shami had their families with them in Dubai but did not stay at the team hotel. The expenses for their stay were borne by the players, not the BCCI. "In our time, we used to say to ourselves not by the cricket board that the first half of the tour should be cricket, and in the second half, the family should come and enjoy it too. It should be a blend," said Kapil, who currently serves as the President of the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI).

Kohli, on Sunday, had expressed his support for the presence of players' families on tours, stating he would always prefer having personal support around him to help navigate tough and intense days on the field, rather than being isolated in his hotel room. —*PTI*



BCCI set to form organising committee for Women's ODI WC

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The BCCI will form the organising committee of the Women's ODI World Cup besides taking a call on the venues for the ICC event it will be hosting later this year at its Apex Council emergent meeting in Kolkata on 22 March.

The meeting will take place ahead of the IPL opener between defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders and Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the Eden Gardens.

The BCCI last hosted a Women's ODI World Cup back in 2013. The exact schedule of the tournament slotted in October is yet to be worked out.According to the agenda accessed by PTI, there will be a "discussion on formation of LOC for Women's Cricket World Cup 2025 and discussion regarding venues for Women's Cricket World Cup 2025".

India has made two finals of the 50-over event but fell short at the final hurdle. Harmanpreet Kaur's team will be aiming to end the long ICC trophy wait at home.The Apex Council will also finalise the structure for the 2025-26 domestic season.As part of the home season, India are scheduled to host West Indies and South Africa and therefore, the members are likely to decide on the venues for the those Test series.

With a new set of of office-bearers in place, an approval for change in signatories to the bank accounts operated by BCCI will also be taken.Following the government's directive, BCCI set to ban tobacco sponsorship Earlier this month, the health ministry instructed the BCCI to ban all forms of tobacco and alcohol promotions, including surrogate advertisements, during the IPL beginning March 22.The Apex Council will take up that matter in the meeting, including sponsorships related to tobacco as well as crypto currency.

"Discussion regarding sponsorship from tobacco and crypto brands," read item No.9 on the agenda. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

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PHOTO: PTI

All eyes are on Chhetri as India face Maldives

SHILLONG, 18 MARCH

The returning Sunil Chhetri will be the cynosure of all eyes as India face Maldives in an international friendly here on Wednesday, the match serving as a dress rehearsal for the all-important AFC Asian Cup qualifier against Bangladesh at the same venue in less than a week's time.

The 40-year-old Chhetri came out of his international retirement earlier this month to help the team successfully navigate the qualifiers for the continent's top football tournament, starting with the 25 March clash.

The preparatory match for Manolo Marquez's side marks a historic moment as the Blue Tigers will play in the football-crazy hill town for the first time.

It will also be India's all-time top scorer Chhetri's first match since announcing his return to international football. —*PTI*

GOLF TO GET T20-STYLE THRILL WITH MIXED FORMAT

Aiming to revolutionise golf in a manner akin to T20 cricket, PGTI has introduced a groundbreaking mixed format at the Rs 2 crore Kapil Dev Grant Thornton Invitational, where India's top male and female golfers will compete together for the first time. o-sanctioned by the Professional Golf Tour of India and the Women's Golf Association of India, the third edition of the tournament will be held at the Prestige Golfshire in Bengaluru from 23 to 26 April. "It is something new that is happening. We want to do something like T20. More thrills in a short time," Kapil, who is the PGTI president, told reporters on Tuesday."We can bring more people to the golf course and more sponsors.

Sinner to compete in Hamburg Open after doping ban

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Top-ranked Jannik Sinner added a clay-court tournament in Hamburg, Germany, to his French Open preparations for when he returns from a three-month doping ban in May.

Organizers of the May 17-24 Hamburg Open announced Sinner's entry on Tuesday.

Sinner will return at the Italian Open before his home fans earlier in May. A spokeswoman for Sinner confirmed to The Associated Press that he will play in Hamburg and said the only Wimbledon warmup that the three-time Grand Slam champion plans to enter is also in Germany, in Halle.

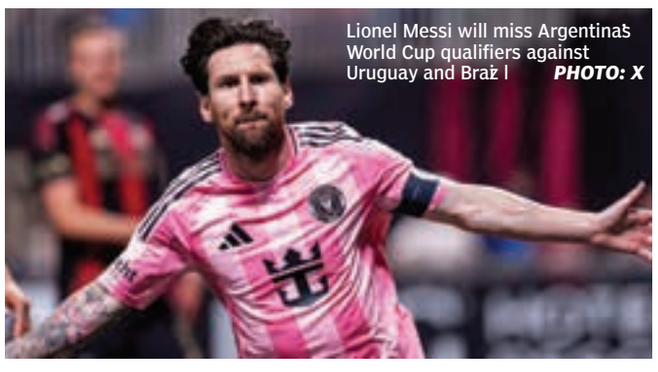
Sinner, who comes from the German-speaking Alto Adige region of Italy, is popular in Germany.

It will mark the first time that Sinner plays Hamburg, during a week when top players often take off. He has played Halle three times winning the grass-court tournament last year. Sinner accepted his ban last month in a settlement with the World Anti-Doping Agency. WADA appealed a decision last year by the International Tennis Integrity Agency to fully exonerate Sinner for what it deemed to be an accidental contamination. —*PTI*

ADDUCTOR INJURY

Messi out of World Cup qualifiers

BUENOS AIRES, 18 MARCH



Lionel Messi will miss Argentina's World Cup qualifiers against Uruguay and Braż l PHOTO: X

Lionel Messi will miss Argentina's World Cup qualifiers against Uruguay and Brazil over the next eight days because of an injury to his adductor.

The 37-year-old Messi was not included in the 25-man squad, as announced on Monday by coach Lionel Scaloni. Later Monday, Inter Miami said Messi the reigning Major League Soccer MVP underwent an MRI "to assess the extent of the discomfort in his adductor region," an injury that the team said occurred in Sunday's win over Atlanta United.

"The examination's findings confirmed the presence of a low-grade injury in the adductor muscle," Inter Miami said. "His clinical progress and response to treatment will determine his availability for competition."

Argentine media initially reported Messi suffered a sore left thigh on Sunday during Inter Miami's 2-1 victory.

Argentina, which leads South America, will visit second-placed Uruguay on Friday and host fifth-placed Brazil four days later at Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires.

Messi was not the only absentee for the two matches that could seal Argentina's qualification. Also ruled out were Paulo Dybala, Gonzalo Montiel and Giovani Lo Celso. Scaloni also dropped Alejandro Garnacho and Claudio Echeverri from the larger squad, which was announced on 2 March.

Messi, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner who captained and led Argentina to the 2022 World Cup title, has been sidelined several times by Inter Miami this season because of injury concerns. —*PTI*